ADA 48 Force Heretic: Book 3

Forty-Eight
([{I}]) ([{I}])

The back of the ship was just fine for him. The observation room was lit up in the swirling blue glow of hyperspace, and was empty of everyone but himself. As the *Jade Shadow* wound its way through hyperspace, the last thing Anakin wanted was for another confrontation with his uncle. Maybe it was because he was afraid of Luke's disapproval, or worried that the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order wouldn't be able to see what he was trying to do and would misinterpret it as something else. On some reflection, Anakin knew that he wouldn't trust himself had the situations been reversed. The last Anakin to use dark side powers ended up going full Sith and wiping out a couple billion people in his reign of terror.

Tahiri's pep-talk had helped some. But it still didn't change the fact that his own uncle didn't trust him, and that definitely hurt. His own emotional and mental barriers were raised, as being on a fairly small ship surrounded by other Force sensitives meant privacy was hard to come by. It also meant that he eventually had to face the music and talk with his uncle once more. Hiding would only work for so long.

"Comfortable?"

"Uncle," Anakin acknowledged politely.

"Can we talk?"

"Sure," Anakin opened his eyes as his uncle sat down on the deck next to him.

"I am sorry, I would have been here sooner, but I just came from a conversation with Vergere."

"What about?"

"She wanted to learn more about the apprentices Vader and the Emperor had. What they did to the galaxy while she was gone. I guess returning to Zonama Sekot has her feeling a bit nostalgic."

"The galaxy went through three governmental changes in her absence," Anakin empathized. "I'd also want to know how the galaxy went down in flames, if I were her. What did you want to talk about, Master Skywalker?"

"I would like to know more about your philosophy of the Force," Luke said. "I let my emotions get the better of me last time. If you are willing, can you tell me again how your beliefs differ from the dark side?"

Anakin nodded slowly. "Sure. Although, you don't have to apologize. I know what I must look like to someone else, and fully understand why you told Kyp and Corran to be careful around me."
"Anakin, I didn't tell them anything," Luke said slowly. "Mara and I haven't discussed your…unique abilities with anyone else."
"It was probably Waxarn or one of his knights then," Anakin sighed. "Jacen and I haven't really been winning any points with them since most of them died in the Remnant."
"Or it could be Vergere," Luke said, watching Anakin to see how his nephew would react.
"It could be," Anakin shrugged. "It doesn't really matter though. I've been checking the HoloNet, and apparently most of the Order has now heard that I can conjure lightning and throw fire. Depending on the pundit, I'm well on the way to following in my grandfather's footsteps."
"It doesn't bother you?"
"Not really," Anakin said honestly, glancing at his uncle with a faint smile. "Jaya and Jace believe in me. Tahiri does too. That's all that really matters in the end, isn't it?"
"I would also like to believe in you, if you give me a chance," Luke said. "It's not like I'm swimming in allies at the moment. I mean, I would definitely appreciate if you didn't see me as some Vader-incarnate. But like I said, it doesn't matter. What matters is that we find Zonama Sekot, convince it to help us end the war, and then go and end an almost four year intergalactic war. I'll worry about what people think of me after we have that settled."
Despite Anakin's tough words, the disquiet the teenage Jedi felt at all the doubts directed towards his self was easily detectable in the Force.
"If I recall correctly," Luke began gently. "You mentioned that you don't believe in a 'dark side' of the Force?"
"Yeah," Anakin breathed, reclining back on the deck to look up at the swirling pattern of hyperspace. As Anakin began to explain his philosophy once more, Luke took it in all in stride. Unlike before, however, Luke continued to analyze Anakin's words logically and as calmly as he could.
With Mara's help, he had centered himself after the conversation with Vergere, to make sure his feelings wouldn't get the better of him. He was also using the bond he had with Mara to ensure that no one else would tamper with his mind during the meeting. Without his emotions filtering his thoughts and what he was hearing, he had to admit that Anakin made some very good points about the Jedi Code and the Force in general. He could also understand why Anakin thought the way he did and agreed that the philosophy would be much too dangerous to

be taught to a wide-spread Jedi audience. Luke found it ironic that the very exercises he was using to clear his mind supported the theory Anakin was espousing; that strong emotions were only bad if uncontrolled.
"And you are certain you've mastered this… darkness…in you?" Luke asked carefully.
"I wouldn't say mastered," Anakin answered, turning towards his uncle. "More like I understand and control it. It wouldn't have been possible without Alema's help. She knows a lot about fighting one's own demons."
Luke sighed, closing his eyes in thought. He could sense his wife's support of Anakin's unorthodox views. At the same time, he still felt conflicted. Having once been seduced by the dark side, he was well aware that it could hide itself in many different ways. Then again, Mara having once been the Hand of the Emperor, would know just as much, if not more, about the side of the Force hidden from most students.
"You don't have to say anything, Uncle," Anakin said, misinterpreting Luke's silence for one of disapproval. "I know that it's probably too unconventional and dangerous. After finally uniting the Jedi, it's too much of a risk to introduce another controversial, Force-related doctrine and expect others to accept it just like that. It's better if you all just…"
"Anakin," Luke interrupted, holding out a steady hand. "I didn't say I disagreed with your stance or think it foolhardy. It is clear that you have thought a lot about your interpretation of the Force, and I'll respect your interpretation so long as you remain aware that not everyone can walk the same path you're walking."
"'The Force is what you make of it. Not what anyone tells you it is,'" Anakin quoted softly.
"Anakin?"
"It's something my teacher taught me when I was on that asteroid. That no one else can tell me what the Force is, because everyone feels the Force differently and has a different bond to it. 'No two Force presences are the same,' she said, 'so why let another tell you what the Force is like when what they see and feel will differ from your own perceptions? You have suffered much these past few days because it is only when you are bereft of hope, of even the will to live, will you truly see the Force as only you can see it, feel it as only you can experience it.'"
Luke froze upon hearing Anakin's last sentence. "Wait, repeat that last part."

Anakin blinked but dutifully complied. "'Will you see the Force as only you can…"
"No, before that."
"'Only when…?" Anakin cast a puzzled stare at his uncle.
"That part," Luke felt his chest grow heavy. Again, his conversation with Vergere returned to occupy his thoughts, specifically when he and Mara were telling the Fosh user about Vader's last apprentice. He wouldn't be surprise if Vergere had planned even *that* conversation knowing full well what his nephew would say. Luke prayed he was wrong, that for once, it was just a coincidence.
"'Only when you are bereft of hope, of even the will to live…"
"That line," Luke whispered, his eyes fluttering close as a memory from his past rose up in him. An identity unmasked. Defeat. Hurt. Another voice was saying those exact words, full of hate, of anger. "Anakin, you never really talked about your teacher…" Luke said slowly. "Can you describe her?"
"Not much to say," Anakin shrugged. "She didn't talk about herself much, only the Force. She was very knowledgeable about it."
"I meant a physical description."
"Uncle?"
"Humor me," Luke said, not feeling very humorous. His heart was racing and his mouth was dry. Dread had settled in a pit in his stomach. He could feel Mara leave the cockpit to Jaina and make her way to the back of the ship.
"She kept most of her body hidden in some type of black life-suit," Anakin said, confused as he sensed a rising alarm grow within his uncle. "She wore some type of triangle headdress and kept most of her face covered. She had greens eyes…oh, and she had a scar over her right eye. Uncle?"
Luke had turned sheet white at the description, his heart pounding.
"And her name? Anakin, what was her name?"
"She introduced herself as Brisha Syo? Uncle, what's wrong?"
"Anakin…you have to forget everything she's taught you," Luke said, doing his very best to keep the panic from his voice.
"Why the sudden change of heart?"
The floor panel to the observation deck moved and Mara entered as Luke answered Anakin.
"Because," Luke said softly, voice hoarse. "Her real name is Shira Brie, also known as Lumiya. She's a Dark Jedi."
"I suspected as much," Anakin said, not quite responding in the way the two Jedi Masters had hoped. "I mean, she did know a lot about the darker Force powers. But that doesn't mean she's wrong."

"Anakin?"
"Aunt Mara, Uncle Luke. Being a Dark Jedi does not immediately mean that everything they say is a lie, or meant to sway one to their side. Her words make a lot of sense, you have to admit that. And she wasn't the one who told me about there being no 'dark side of the Force,' it was a conclusion Alema and I came to by ourselves."
"*After* she's taught you all sorts of things and guided you in your development," Mara interjected, relying on her husband to keep her from exploding in disbelief. "Anakin, think long and hard. What reason would Lumiya have for training you, for teaching you how to embrace your emotions?"
"To help end the war," Anakin said sharply. "Has it ever occurred to you that there may not be some grand scheme at play? That the Dark Jedi want the Yuuzhan Vong gone as much as anyone else? If the Yuuzhan Vong win, even the Dark Jedi won't be safe. Brisha, Lumiya, whoever she is, helped me better understand myself, the Force, my place in this galaxy. I don't see anything wrong or harmful about that."
"I know you're not *that* naïve, Anakin," Mara countered. "She wants you to think a certain way for a reason."
"It's not like I'm completely denying that a dark side doesn't exist," Anakin argued. "It just exists in a way different than most people believe. It isn't in the Force, but an inherent part within every living being."
Luke placed a staying hand on his wife's arm. "What is the difference between a Jedi who has fallen, and one who hasn't, Anakin?"
"Dark Jedi willingly and consciously let their emotions, greed, and ambitions control their actions," Anakin clarified. "A Jedi does not."
"And you," Luke said steadily. "Where do you fall in that spectrum?"
"I'd like to think myself a Jedi," Anakin said. "But I'm not the Jedi most people should think of when they think about one."
"None of us are, Little Brother." Jacen and Jaina climbed through the hatch.
"When people think of Jedi, they think of heroes and protectors," Jacen added to his sister's comment. "We all know that that's only a small fraction of who we are."
"How long have you two known about Anakin's…other…abilities?" Mara glanced at the twins.
"Suspected?" Jaina asked, looking at her younger brother. "Since he came back from the asteroid he trained on. He was different, darker, more closed off."

"Known?" Jacen said. "Since Ebaq Nine. We were all connected in the battlemeld, but because he's our brother, we saw things the others didn't."
"And you weren't concerned?"
"He's our little brother," Jacen said, draping a supportive arm around his shoulders. "We trust him. He's no more likely to become a Sith than me or Jaina."
"Even knowing that his teacher on that asteroid was a dark Jedi?" Luke questioned.
That seemed to surprise both Jacen and Jaina. But they quickly recovered. Jaina smirked at her brother. "Dark Jedi teaching him or no, he's still my pain-in-the-butt little brother, Anakin."
"Thanks, Jaya," Anakin said with a wry grin.
"This is serious," Mara said.
"Our brother's too self-sacrificing to go dark," Jacen said supportively. "Don't worry Mara. He has us, Tahiri, and all our friends watching out for him."
"He won't go dark," Jaina nodded. "I'd stake my life on it."
Anakin sent out waves of thanks to his siblings for their support, meeting Luke and Mara's gazes reassuringly. "What they said. Besides the…"
Powerful vibrations of Force energy passed through the ship. Again and again, like the ringing of a bell. All five very powerful Force sensitives in the room felt it, their eyes widening in alarm.
"What…?"
"You feel it too?"
"Where is it coming from?"
Vergere's voice came over the ship intercom. *"Now would be a good time for all of you to return to the cockpit. <u>That</u>, is Zonama Sekot."*
([{II}]) ([{II}])
"So, Boss Boy, where are these blonds of yours that you mentioned?"
"They'll show, Vega," Uldir replied, choosing to ignore her name for him. Kriff, he hated it when his crew called him that.
"Sometime today?" Leaft, the lone Dug on his crew grumped. "Maybe we should tell the Vong to delay their attack because we needed time to get our allies together."
"They'll show," Uldir repeated.
"Uldir, we've delayed our launch for nearly two hours now," Vega sounded sympathetic. "Unless we take off now, we might…"
"Here they come," Klin-Fa pointed across the busy spaceport.
"Boss Boy, I thought only two more humans were coming," Leaft blinked.

"I thought so too."
"They're all Jedi," Klin-Fa blinked at the approaching mass of people. Leading the group was Danni Quee and Tahiri Kwaad. "At least the front dozen or so are. I can't say the same about the back."
"They're not going to all fit in our ship," Vega said apprehensively, motioning back to their small Corellian-built transport.
"We already have too many humans as it is," Leaft said, scowling at Klin-Fa as if it were her fault.
"Wait a minute. Is that Han Solo?" Vook, a Duros and the last of the four member crew asked in disbelief.
"It is." Uldir was taken aback.
"Hi!" Tahiri called out perkily, bouncing into the hangar with Danni while the others waited outside. "Sorry we're late!"
"Tahiri," Uldir raised an eyebrow. "Your friends?"
"Yup. And they're all here to help," Tahiri smiled. She pointed to where Han and Leia were. "I told Captain Solo about how Boba Fett was in trouble, and he jumped at a chance to have Boba Fett indebted to him." She motioned to Corran and Mirax, who were standing with their two children. "And when Valin and Jysella heard that Sannah and Doran might be in trouble, they volunteered to come along. So naturally, their parents had to come too." She motioned to Saba Sebatyne and Tesar. "And when Saba and Tesar heard that we were hunting Yuuzhan Vong, and that I was going on the mission, they felt obligated to help us after what we did for Barab." She then jerked a thumb at Zekk, Tekli, and Lowbacca. "And if Tesar and I were going along, they wanted to come too. Also, since Mandalore might need aid afterwards, Captain Solo convinced Lando and Talon Karde to send some supply ships their way. Danni's also bringing along a science team to evaluate the effects of the various things they're bringing along."
Uldir, Klin-Fa, Vega, Leaft, and Vook, all stared in disbelief as their minds tried to make sense of the rapid-fire explanation.
"Oh, and since they had just retaken Drackmar and were still in the area, we managed to get support from General Garm Bel Iblis' task group. And since *they* were working with the Imperial group under Master Durron, we have his ships en route as well," Tahiri finished with a broad grin.
"What she said," Danni said once she managed to get a word in.
The crew of the *No Luck Required* stared at Tahiri as if she had just grown an extra head.
"How the flupp did you get all that?" Uldir finally managed. "Klin-Fa and I spent an entire two days trying to drum up support, and you do this, in what, two hours?"

"More or less," Tahiri nodded. "It pays to have a well-connected boyfriend."
"I must not be doing something right then," Klin-Fa said, tilting her nose up at Uldir in mock distain.
"Great, as if I don't feel worthless enough," Uldir rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm sure Mandalore will be more than thankful."
"I'll be going with the Solos in the *Falcon*," Danni Quee explained. "It'll be one of three other ships taking off from Mon Cal with you guys."
"Three?" Uldir said, still trying to get over his shock.
"The *Falcon, Pulsar Skate,* and *Lady Luck,"* Tahiri elaborated.
"And you blamed me for taking after the Solos," Danni said with a sidelong grin to the younger woman.
"We'll meet at the hyperspace jump point," Han Solo said, tossing a datapad over to Uldir. "That's the number of ships and supplies we have on hand. Since you're more experienced with the rescue aspect of things, you can take care of it."
Uldir glanced at the numbers, then let out an exasperated sigh. "Is it too late to want my life to be simple again?"
"Definitely," Klin-Fa and Tahiri said in unison.
Uldir hung his head. "Alright, then let's get going."
The group by the hangar door departed to their designated ships.
"Is there any chance I can get you to do this whenever we need support? I don't want to go through the Senate again if my life depended on it," Klin-Fa asked Tahiri.
"I wouldn't either. I think everyone going on this mission is actually running from one Senate meeting or another," Tahiri replied while they walked up into the *No Luck Required* together.
Leaft and Vook stared at each other, then at Uldir, let out barking laughs, and followed after the two young women into the ship.
"Well Boss Boy, it's your show," Vega said, clapping him on the back. "You got the support you need, so let's burn sky until we see lines."
"Right," Uldir smiled faintly. Now that the famous Han and Leia Solo, and several other famous Jedi, were onboard for a potentially very fatal mission, the last thing he wanted was for anything to go wrong. They may be a rescue force to save the Mandalorians, but from the attitude of the Senate, it was clear no one was going to come after them if *they* needed help. "Let's do this."
([{III}]) ([{III}])
It was late at night at the Kyrimorut, but many members of Clan Skirata were still wide awake. Sannah exhaled as she slowly tended to the glass of water in her hands. Doran somehow had fallen asleep despite the pressure-heavy atmosphere, and she envied him.

The tension in the base was nerve-racking. She was all for the Mandalorian maxim that pressure created gems, but it was almost crazy how disciplined and military minded those around her were. It was like preparing for the coming battle had consumed their existence. That the coming fight was all they lived for.
She had no idea how Doran had managed to train and live with them for an entire year. All this macho-soldier business just wasn't her thing.
"You're looking a bit pensive," a voice startled the Melodie teen out of her thoughts.
Sannah glanced up to see one of Clan Skirata's older Mandalorians standing by her.
"Mind of I take a seat?" The man gestured to the empty chair opposite of Sannah at the long wooden table.
"Go ahead," Sannah motioned politely.
"Thanks," the Mandalorian sat and placed a plate of some type of syrup-drenched cake in front of him. "Uj cake, wanna piece?"
"No, it's okay," Sannah smiled softly.
"Your loss," the Mandalorian shrugged.
During her stay at the Kyrimorut, Sannah had met several of the older Mandalorians, all of whom were veterans of the Clone War. These Mandalorians had actually deserted the army and had been adopted by Clan Skirata much like Scout, Bardan, and Kina Ha had been. Despite being clones, the Mandalorians she had met were all different not only in terms of personality, but also in terms of the women they had married. It was impossible to mistake one Mandalorian for another, and they all had their own unique quirks. After Doran awoke from his Force-induced coma, Sannah had quickly caught up on her manners and introduced herself to the other occupants of the Kyrimorut. She had learned much about their families, their adventures and stories, and found the members of Clan Skirata to be a wholly different type of Mandalorian than what she had grown used to on Raxis Prime.
One of the first Mandalorians she made a point in meeting was Jintar's father, Kom'rk Skirata. For a while, he had been a one-woman-a-week type of man. But that was until he met Jintar's mother. From Kom'rk, Sannah had learned that Jintar's mother had been a very talented singer working under a very dubious contract. Kom'rk just so happened to hear her sing and fell in love at first sight. After a high-flying, guns-blazing adventure involving a criminal syndicate, a Hutt, and an army of retired Clone War soldiers, Kom'rk took the singer back to Mandalore and married her. Unfortunately the happiness didn't last for long, and Jintar's mother died at childbirth from unforeseen complications. Even the combined efforts of Scout and Kina Ha hadn't been able to save

her. Sannah had spent some time listening to old recordings of Jintar's mother and had to admit that her voice had been very beautiful. Kom'rk made up for her death by devoting everything he had to his son, and his pride in Jintar for being in the *Ori'ramikade* was clear in the way the man spoke. The two had a strong bond and Sannah could easily see why Doran spoke highly of them.

Of course, nothing could have prepared her for the comedic duo that was Fi and Atin. Sannah nearly broke a rib laughing at their deadpan deliveries and energetic jokes. Their children had likewise inherited their father and uncles' dry Mandalorian humor, much to their mothers' chagrin, and that night had filled the Kyrimorut with joyful mirth. From them, Sannah learned that it was very possible to die laughing.

Atin and his wife Laseema, a Rutian Twi'lek, had adopted a small group of children sometime towards the end of the Empire. All eight of their children had been 'liberated' from various slave owners at different times during Atin and Laseema's travels, and had been raised as proper Mandalorians. Four humans, three Twi'leks—all of whom were different colored—and a small Cathar girl, rounded out Atin's very unique contribution to Clan Skirata.

That's not to say Fi and his Mandalorian wife Parja, hadn't added any to the family either. The two Mandalorians were the proud parents of four children themselves; and together with Atin and Laseema and their children, they made up a sizable portion of Clan Skirata.

If Sannah wanted to catch up on the latest news regarding someone's personal life, she didn't have to look much further than the opinionated A'den Skirata. Through him, she learned a little bit about the history of how the former soldiers all ended up on Mandalore, and had been fascinated about the tales A'den had to share. The story took a brighter turn when A'den concluded the tale by proudly showing off holos of his three daughters; all of whom were accomplished Mandalorian Protectors.

As Sannah had quickly learned, however, not all of the former soldiers were alike. She had also encountered the unofficial leader of the former Clone Troopers, Ordo Skirata. Someone, Sannah learned, she should probably give a wide berth. From the others, she learned that Ordo wasn't exactly the friendliest towards Jedi, but was a very good leader and cared for the others a lot.

Despite these meetings, she had, however, yet to be introduced to the Mandalorian talking to her. From the man's resemblance to Kom'rk, it was clear that he had also once been a Clone Trooper. "You're one of Jintar's uncles?"

"What gave me away? Was it the face? I always thought I was the one who received the handsome genes and my brothers the ugly ones."
Sannah hid her grin by taking a sip of water. Her ribs were still aching from all the laughing inflicted on her by Fi and Atin.
"The name's Mereel," the Mandalorian introduced himself, between bite-fulls of his cake. "Jintar and Dinua have talked a lot about you, Jedi."
"They have?"
"Said you had a good head on your shoulders. A good fighter."
"Oh," Sannah felt her cheeks warm. Coming from Dinua and Jintar, two Supercommandos, that was high praise indeed.
"So, what are you doing up at this hour?"
"Couldn't sleep."
"That's obvious."
"The atmosphere here. Is it always so intense?"
"Sadly," Mereel nodded, gesturing with his fork. "You get yourself surrounded by people train from birth to be soldiers, and this is what you get."
Sannah was taken aback. "You don't seem as…"
"High strung?"
"Yeah."
"I just know how to have a good time," he grinned, leaning forward. "What about you?"
"I…"
"*Ba'vodu*."
Both Sannah and Mereel looked to the side to see a twenty-something year old olive-skinned woman standing next to them with raised eyebrows.
"Etain'ika," Mereel said, "Pull up a seat." He looked back to Sannah and jerked a thumb at the new arrival. "Niner's kid. I'm probably the only one of us that's still single and without any brats running around."
"Uncle, please tell me you weren't trying to…with her." Etain gestured at Sannah with a look of exasperation, her Basic heavily tinted with her Mandalorian background.
Mereel blinked. "Hey, that *wasn't* what I meant by having a good time. Well, not this time at least. Come on, give me some credit, she's younger than you and has a boyfriend."
"That girl down at the bar was younger than me and was married," Etain said dryly. "*Ni'buir* and Ordo had to stop her husband from hunting you down and cutting off your..."
Mereel held up his hands. "I promise my intentions were completely honorable, *ori'haat."*

Etain shook her head and took the third of four seats at the table. She held out a hand towards Sannah. "Ignore my uncle. *Ni cuyi* Etain, Etain Skirata. I heard there were a couple of new Jedi here."
"Sannah, of the Melodie," Sannah just shook her head in amusement. Yup, she was definitely getting too used to the Mandalorian humor.
"Etain here is in the Protectors," Mereel boasted just like a proud uncle. "One of the best tech experts they have."
"I was allowed to return to help defend my clan," she explaining, ducking her head shyly at her uncle's praise.
"Nice to meet you," Sannah greeted.
"Likewise, Jedi. My Clan has only good things to say about you." Etain then focused on Mereel. "So, *ba'vodu*, about those good times?"
"Oh right, I was going to ask the Jedi if she was up to helping me arrange a little party to help relax the lads…and ladies," Mereel quickly added. "The Jedi's right. There's only so much planning and preparing we can do."
"I think my dad would be saying something about proper planning preventing piss poor performances," Etain pointed out with a shake of her head. "The last thing we all want to do is be a bit tired and emotional when the *Vongese* come. Besides, Uncle Ordo would shoot that idea down faster than you go through women."
"But we have to do something," Sannah said to Etain, while Mereel sputtered protests that Etain's comment wasn't true. "I mean, look at your cousins. They look like they're about to break just by eating a piece of cake!"
They glanced at several other members of Clan Skirata sitting further down the table, who were stiffly and mechanically bringing their eating utensils up and down while their jaws moved robotically as they consumed their meal.
"All right you have a point," Etain sighed.
"You have any ideas?" Mereel asked Sannah.
Sannah worried her lower lip for a moment, then nodded. "How about a competition?"
"Competition?" Both Mereel and Etain repeated.
"Uh huh, non-lethal of course," Sannah quickly added, remembering that she *was* with Mandalorians after all. "A tournament, complete with a feast, prizes, and bragging rights."
"Go on," Mereel grinned. "I'm definitely liking the sound of this."
"There can be the usual challenges, like shooting, hand-to-hand, racing, and the like," Sannah said. "But then we can also have more mental challenges, puzzle-solving, slicing. You know, to keep everyone fit, but at the same time allow them to have fun."

Etain nodded her approval. "Brains and brawns."
"We can even invite the nearby clans to participate. Get a little inter-clan rivalry going on," Mereel added.
"Non-lethal," Sannah reminded.
"We're not all diehard Mandalorians like the *Or'ramikade* are," Etain laughed.
"Hey, Fi!" Mereel gestured to his brother, who had just entered the room. "Come on over. We have a competition to plan."
([{IV}]) ([{IV}])
Despite the merriment being planned several rooms over, merriment was the last thing on Doran's mind. Not many people enjoyed waking up in a cold sweat, hands shaking, and gasping for air.
Doran was one of them.
Even after having saved his sanity by entering the deep hibernation trance known as *Morichro*, he hadn't been immediately successful in his attempts. It was hard to hibernate when shapers were literally picking you apart without any anesthetic. The only time he had to attempt to enter the deep trance was during the shapers' meal times, and even then it had taken him a while. At least, from the reactions of his mother and Sannah, he had been able to shield most of his pain from them.
Doran groaned and rubbed at his face. As he did, his eyes caught the sight of the slightly pinkish skin on his arm, evidence that the skin had only recently been regrown. Just seeing the arm caused his mind to flashback to the ordeal. Being strapped down with a ysalamari placed nearby, unable to do anything but scream himself hoarse as the Shaping tools went to work.
He glanced about the spartan quarters he had been loaned. His reflection in the nearby metal sheet that served as a mirror only heightened his anxiety. One natural brown iris, and one milky-gold, created as a result of whatever chemicals the Yuuzhan Vong had dripped into it, stared back at him. The pigmentation change was irreversible, and as minor as a change in eye color seemed, it was just another reminder of what he had went through.
Suddenly, the small, cramped quarters seemed a bit *too* small and cramped.
Barely controlling his pounding heart, Doran slid out of his cot and staggered out the door. He blindly stumbled through the underground halls of the Kyrimorut, ignoring the exclamations of the people he bumped into. It was only when he managed to reach the surface, feel the cool breeze of Mandalore wash over him, did Doran finally release the breath he had been holding.

He took several steps away from the entrance, and then several more, his bare feet automatically sliding through the dirt, his body sagging wearily. When he was just out of sight of the fortified home of Clan Skirata, his legs shook, then gave way as he collapsed to his knees. He felt weak, drained…helpless.

"Of all the planets, I have to break down on Mandalore," Doran managed with a laughing sob.

He shook silently as tears rolled down his cheeks. He marshaled whatever was left of his concentration to keep Sannah or his mother from worrying. He didn't want them to see him like this. Didn't want anyone to know that the Yuuzhan Vong had truly gotten to him, beaten him. That the only reason why he had achieved *Morichro* was because he had been wishing for death. That he truly tried to stop his heart from beating to avoid any more pain.

The young teen inhaled shakily, turning a pained gaze up at the distant twin moons and the field of stars they resided in. He tried to center himself, tune in to the natural rhythms that made up the planet. The cool wind helped to dry his sweat-slickened body and assuage the higher-than-normal heat it was giving off.

But it wasn't enough.

Every time he closed his eyes, he could see the leering, smug faces of the shapers looking down at him. His muscles and nerves would fire off in sympathy, leaving him breathless once more.

He glanced about the area he had ended up in; a rocky area with a steep, sheer drop into the sea below. It had been one of the reasons why the Kyrimorut had been built where it had, an easily defendable position. Though it was night, the moon provided just enough light for him to see the water wash up against the sharp, jagged rocks below. Rising off his knees, which had been cut up by the rocky ground he had been kneeling on, Doran edged closer to the rocky ledge. He barely felt the sting of the freshly opened cuts. They were nothing in comparison to what the shapers had done. Reaching the very edge of the cliff, Doran just stared out at the vast sea before him, watching the reflection of the stars and moon shimmer with every movement of the water. He didn't know how long he just stood there, watching the waves dash against the rocks below.

"You know, I have a jetpack. So if you want to make a game of it, jump and let's see if I can catch you."

Doran stiffened, but didn't turn around. "Dinua? What are you doing out here? Weren't you with Jintar?"

"I *was* with Jintar. That is, until one of his cousins interrupted us and told me you were going for a nighttime walk in your underclothes."

"Sorry," Doran murmured, closing his eyes and frantically wiping away his tears.
"So, are you going to jump?"
"Wasn't thinking about it."
"Right, because all sane people go up to the edge of a cliff in their underclothes at this hour just to stare at the waves."
Doran was silent for a minute. "Back on Gargon, when Jintar and I saved you from those upper classmen…how did you get over it…what they did to you?"
Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dinua take a step so that she was standing shoulder to shoulder with him. The blond Mandalorian teen joined Doran in scrutinizing the rocks at the bottom of the cliff. The simple nightgown she wore fluttered in the night air. "That's what I had the two of you for. The two of you got me through it. You even let me kill the bastard who led that lot. Very therapeutic. Why do you ask? You need me to hunt down some shapers so you can have a couple of therapy sessions of your own?"
"Jedi aren't allowed to seek revenge," Doran shook his head.
"It's not vengeance, its justice."
"You and Sannah killed the ones responsible. It's not justice if I place their crimes on another."
Dinua snorted. "Semantics. The *Vongese* hurt you. You're entitled to retaliate against their clan."
"I'm not *Mando'ad*, I don't go by your code."
"Right, so you say. When you gave yourself up for the bulk of the *Or'ramikade*, were you just doing the noble Jedi thing, or were you thinking like a duty-bound *Mando'ad,* and trying to protect your brothers and sisters?"
Doran exhaled and took a seat, his feet dangling over the edge. "You know the answer to that."
"I'm not the mind reader here, *dikut*."
"I was trying to protect *your* brothers and sisters," Doran muttered. "The Jedi thing only crossed my mind after I had boarded the *Vongese* ship."
"Problem solved. You were a *Mando'ad* when they captured and tortured you, so you can get justice our way."
"You really want me to become a *dar'Jetii*?" Doran said wryly, resting back on the palms of his hands.
"Might be interesting to see, but it won't happen. You're too *you* to be evil."
Doran smiled faintly, shaking his head. "Whatever that means."
"It means you're too dense to listen to what I'm telling you."

"Huh?"
"Exactly," Dinua took a seat next to him. "I'm almost glad to be handing you off to Sannah. Much more trouble than you're worth. Look, I got through my personal *dar'yaim* because I had you and Jintar backing me up. At that time, the two of you were my only friends and I was lucky you put up with me for so long.
You sacrificed yourself for over fifty *Or'ramikade*. That's fifty of *our* brothers and sisters who have your back. Some who even died getting you out of the *Vongese* base. You have them, and you have Sannah, Jintar, your mother, and myself. It's not a sign of weakness to seek help when you need it, Doran. Even *Mando'ade* rely on one and other when things get tough."
"Dinua, we're on *Mando'yaim.* I can't just break down and cry in front of a bunch of people who are trained from birth to kill in a dozen different ways. It's not like I'll win any points by complaining of a little pain."
"Would you quit acting so *jagyc*?" Dinua said in exasperation. "It doesn't fool anyone, least of all me. *Gar cuyi Doran*, *ner di'kutla, mirdala burc'ya bal cabur.* You never cared what the *Mando'ade* on Gargon thought of you and Jintar. You kicked their *shebse* and came in third in our class, right behind me and Jintar. Besides, most of Clan Skirata saw you running through the Kyrimorut. It's not like you can say you fancied a nearly-naked nighttime jog."
"Who knows, it might work," Doran shrugged flippantly.
"That's sounds more like the Doran I know," Dinua said approvingly. "You have that Force-bond thing with Sannah. Use it."
"How do you know I haven't?"
Dinua gave him a sharp-eyed look. "Because I'm here and she's not."
"Good point."
"*Dikut*," Dinua sighed.
"Sorry for ruining your night," Doran murmured, noting that she didn't have much more on beside the thin nightgown she was wearing.
"You and Sannah made it possible. You're forgiven this once," Dinua nudged him. "Come on. Let's go back. It's freezing out here."
"I feel fine," Doran shrugged. "Force helps keep the warmth in."
Dinua muttered darkly about where Doran could shove his Force and lightly dug her elbow into him. "For those of us not blessed with mystic powers, would you kindly consider returning with me?"
Doran felt Sannah reach out with the Force to locate him, no doubt having heard some variation of his flight from the Kyrimorut. He sent an 'I'm fine' message, only to see Dinua arch an eyebrow at him.
"Doran."

"I thought you said you couldn't read minds."
"I can't. But I know you. You just told Sannah you were fine, didn't you?"
Doran flinched and tacked on a 'can we talk in my quarters?' to his message.
Dinua's with you, isn't she?
Doran blinked, bewildered, wondering how girls did that. And Dinua smothered a laugh as she accurately guessed the reason for his reaction. "Tell her I said hi and that I'm bringing you back now."
Doran mock scowled at the older teen. But when the subject of the scowl is a battle hardened Mandalorian Supercommando who eats blasterbolts and detonators for breakfast; he ending up being about as intimidating as a decomposed womp-rat.
They made their way back to the Kyrimorut at a pace slightly faster than he had left it. Before they ducked back inside, Doran held out a hand to momentarily halt their progress. "Dinua."
"Doran?"
"Thanks."
"Don't mention it," Dinua playfully slugged him on his shoulder. "It's kind of the norm for us, isn't it? Helping the other get out of *dar'yaim.* Even three years later."
"Yeah," Doran smiled. "It is. Well, enjoy whatever's left of your night. I guess I have to go tell Sannah that…well…" His expression fell.
"That you're having a perfectly normal reaction to being held captive and tortured by an enemy force," Dinua said, her voice softening again. "It's nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of. You made it through, that's all that matters. Even the docs say that a lesser man would have died."
Doran sighed and nodded. "Well then, this slightly greater than a lesser man has his girlfriend to confide to now."
Dinua briefly placed a hand on his shoulder in support, before nodding and disappearing into the building. Breathing out one last time, Doran descended the steps after her.
([{V}]) ([{V}])
"This is Ronal Idan, the Galactic Star's embedded reporter, reporting live from the Imperial Star Destroyer Chimaera, the flagship of Grand Admiral Pellaeon. This is part two of a five part series surrounding the latest actions of one Anakin Solo. Is he an up and coming Sith Lord? The Death Knights under Jedi Knight Waxarn Kel certainly think so. Yesterday you heard them describe how the once hero of the Galactic Alliance used lightning and flame to kill. For those who haven't been keeping up with the latest events, the Code of the Jedi forbids them

from killing using their mystical powers. And only Dark Jedi are known to produce lightning. Today's stunning revelation? Anakin Solo was well aware that former Jedi Knight Alema Rar had fallen to the dark side, but he not only ignored it, he protected her from others. Jedi Knight Maez, who served with Waxarn and was present on Kalee when Jedi Rar declared her true allegiance, has this to say. 'When we tried to apprehend her after she killed five of our friends, Anakin Solo just sat back and watched. If anything he seemed amused by the turn of events. Tell me, is that the type of person who we should let be the next Grandmaster of the Jedi Order?' Another quote from..."

Tahiri turned off the HoloNet report and glared at the speaker box as if it was responsible for all the bad press Anakin was receiving. She picked it up and threw it across the room, cursing in Yuuzhan Vong as she did.

The Jedi Knights who followed Waxarn Kel had been venting their grief for the friends they had lost during the conflicts within Imperial space by describing, in great detail, the 'Sith-like' actions Anakin and Alema had taken on Kalee. Naturally, anything about Anakin Solo was news worthy, and the media outlets ran with it. Instead of the Hero of Ebaq 9 and next Grandmaster, some outlets were now calling Anakin a power hungry manipulator and the next Lord of the Sith. They pointed to his manipulation of the High Council for the campaigns into Hutt Space and the Remnant as prime examples of his future ambitions. '*No one else can snap his fingers and have our government stumbling to supply him with a full fleet*.' They blamed the deaths of the Jedi from Kyp's Dozen and the Death Knights on Anakin's desire to get rid of any organized opposition to his rise to power. '*Similar to Palpatine's rise to power, Anakin Solo is isolating any potential threats and using underhanded means to dispose of them*.' It was almost like the news broadcasts out of Hapes during Anakin's trial all over again.

Not all the news channels had turned on Anakin. But the fact that the Galactic Star was not among them, spoke volumes for the public perception of the one who had once been the poster boy of the Jedi Order. With Anakin unable to defend himself in the Unknown Regions, Waxarn Kel's Death Knights were more or less having their way with the reporters. She knew Anakin had said to let things run its course, but she didn't have to like it.

"Sorry, I can come back at a later time," Klin-Fa said from the doorway behind Tahiri.

Tahiri spun around in surprise. "Oh, sorry. It's just the stupid news reporters blathering on about how Anakin's going to be some Sithspawn incarnate."

"It's on all the major channels," Klin-Fa said with an understanding nod of her head. She sat cross-legged across from Tahiri and took a deep breath. "Do you really think I can learn how to sense Vong?"
Tahiri shrugged. "It's really up to you."
"You're younger than me, don't start spouting Jedi Master-y lines," Klin-Fa scowled.
"But it really is," Tahiri said calmly. "The trick to learning Vongsense is that you have to embrace the Yuuzhan Vong culture as a whole. Come to terms with whatever fears or horrors you experienced at their hands."
Klin-Fa grew pale. "There's no flippin' way I can embrace anything about those scarheads. Not after what they did to Yabeley, to Bey…to me."
"Would you rather spend the rest of your life fearing them?" Tahiri's voice was gentle and understanding. Through the conversations she had had with Alema, Tahiri had learned about what it was like to truly be afraid of the Yuuzhan Vong, of their strange ways and language. She could empathize with what Klin-Fa was going through, and was determined to help the older teen come to terms with her ordeal. "All you have to do is accept what they did and move on."
"Easy for you to say," Klin-Fa muttered, bringing her knees up to her chest and gripping them. "You had the entire personality transplant. You're practically a Vong. And they didn't…didn't torture your boyfriend to death in front of you."
"Have you talked with Uldir about it?" Tahiri kept her voice even, doing her best to endure the distress leaking through Klin-Fa's emotional barriers.
"Talk to him?" Klin-Fa laughed weakly. "What can he do? I don't want to burden him with my silly little problems. The last thing I want to do is have him see me as a little girl afraid of a couple of bad dreams."
Tahiri raised an eyebrow and shifted into Vongphase.
Klin-Fa immediately stiffened and let out a feral hiss. "Don't do that!"
Tahiri exited from Vongphase. "Just a couple of bad dreams?"
"There's nothing wrong with being afraid of the scarheads," Klin-Fa swallowed.
"Klin-Fa, I know what it's like to be Shaped. But unlike you, I had Anakin to help me out every step of the way. It's because of him that I was able to come to terms with what they did to me. You've gone for what? Two years, three, keeping it all in?"
"Two," Klin-Fa whispered. "I was captured shortly before you were."

Tahiri slowly reached out and gripped one of Klin-Fa's hands comfortingly. "Two years. I would have gone insane without Anakin. I have no idea how you managed it."
"Me neither," Klin-Fa muttered.
"If you don't want to go to Uldir, would…share some of it with me?"
Klin-Fa's head rose, her expression haunted and pained. "I…I don't want to be scared anymore. But…the memories, they hurt so bad…"
Tahiri reached out with the Force, forming a tentative bond with the older Jedi and leaving the rest up to Klin-Fa.
Klin-Fa's dark eyes held Tahiri's soothing green, before fluttering close as Klin-Fa began sharing the memories and emotions that she had bottled up for so long. Her breathing and Tahiri's synced, their thoughts becoming one as their minds flew back to another time and place.
Tahiri was strapped down to a table, looking upwards at the reflective surface of the ceiling. Around her, Yuuzhan Vong shapers talked to her in an alien tongue, the spineray embedded in her nervous system producing only pain. Tahiri felt panic, fear. She could hear her boyfriend in the next room crying out in pain, feel his agony translate through their Force bond, further increasing her own pain.
Back on the *No Luck Required*, Tahiri's jaw tightened, tears rolling down her cheeks as she continued to share Klin-Fa's most traumatizing memories.
The shapers were discussing something. A sharp-toothed creature was held over her. She tried to struggle, to escape, but she couldn't move. The spineray had done something to numb the rest of her body. Eyes, wide in terror, bulged as the shapers began to cut into her skull. Her body may have been numbed, but she could still feel pain. Staring up in horror at the distorted reflection in the ceiling, Tahiri watched as her brain was exposed.
Tahiri inhaled sharply, the techniques these shapers used were different than what had been used on her. Meezhan Kwaad and Nen Yim had burrowed into her mind via the three scars on her forehead. Used the spineray to force her to accept the new memories. With Klin-Fa, however, it appeared as if these shapers were purposely grafting Yuuzhan Vong brain matter onto her own brain.
Pain. Wanting death. She passes out. When she next awakens, she could hear the Yuuzhan Vong talking. To her horror, she realizes that she could understand them.
'You know what we are saying, don't you, Jeedai?'
She responds with a frantic nod, knowing that refusal will only lead to more pain. She glances up at her reflection and realizes that they had

restored the top half of her skull back to its place. A vivid, zigzag scar was the only physical evidence of what they had done.
'The Shaping was a success.' One scarred shaper looks to another. 'The male Jeedai will be next. They shall be the first in an army of Jeedai, Shaped as Yun-Ne'shel wills.'
Time passes. They leave her alone. In the distance, she could hear several warriors discussing plans to sabotage the bacta. She knows that she has to escape. But she won't leave. Not without her friends. Pain, blinding pain. Then an emptiness unmatched by anything she had felt before. And she knew then that the man she loved was no more.
"Anakin," Tahiri breathed, her heart racing as she tore herself from the memory, and frantically gripped onto their Force bond. Despite the fact that he was on the opposite side of the galaxy, she could still feel his comforting response—however faint—and it was enough to steady her. With a sad smile, she got up and wrapped Klin-Fa in a protective hug. "You've survived, Klin-Fa," She whispered. "Survived for so long. Now it's time for you to live."
([{VI}]) ([{VI}])
Blissfully unaware of the media-created drama taking the rest of the galaxy, the occupants of the *Jade Shadow* did their best to endure the waves of Force energy bombarding their minds.
"And you are certain it's Zonama Sekot?" Mara glanced at the Fosh Force-user as Luke, the Solo siblings, and herself, piled into the bridge of the *Jade Shadow*.
"One does not mistake the Force presence of a planet, young Jedi Master," Vergere said wryly, even as another screaming pulse of Force energy washed over them.
"But it feels distressed, frightened even," Jacen murmured.
"All the more reason we should go to it." For the first time, Vergere sounded truly concerned.
"Going closer might make things worse," Jaina pointed out.
"Jacen, you're our resident life-sensitive, what do you think?" Anakin glanced to his brother.
Jacen shook his head slowly after a moment of concentration. "I can't get a read on this mind. But if we're going to do something, we should do it soon."
"For more reasons than one," Mara said, flinching at yet another, almost deafening pulse of energy. "This hyperspace corridor is starting to collapse. We either keep going or pull out now."
Luke exhaled. "We go."

They formed a powerful meld to help navigate the perilous hyperspace routes. And, with the Force to guide them, and Vergere acting like a beacon reaching out to Zonama Sekot, their combined minds navigated the *Jade Shadow* through hyperspace. Vergere's call through the Force resulted in a returning, sonar-like echo, which helped give direction.

Everyone seemed to take a deep breath in unison, feeling something change as the pushed past the waves of Force-energy streaming outwards. As if penetrating a storm-wall and finding one's self in its eye, the harshness of the Force-energy swirling around them ebbed and became a gentle wind.

In front of them, the sensor panels revealed a solar system that had been hidden away from the galaxy. A single sun, gas giants looming, and one single green-blue speck tucked within it all. And where there was green, there was plant life, blue, there was water. A world of life. A living world. They had found it.

Zonama Sekot.

But as they grew closer, they could see yellow and bright red clouds flaring outwards as energy weapons flashed in the atmosphere of the planet. Ships of all sorts were darting about, some bursting open from some unseen force, hurling bodies into the vacuum of space. And from the planet's poles, massive sheets of lightning raced around the equator, and then, with a violent crack, whipped out to slam two of the attacking ships together with impossibly strong, planet-sized tractor beams.

Zonama Sekot's attackers were clearly Yuuzhan Vong. But flirting with these alien organic vessels was another fleet of ships that none aboard but Vergere had ever seen before. Each of these ships was unique, clearly living as well, and very much as deadly as their Yuuzhan Vong counterparts.

"Zonama Sekot is fighting back," Vergere said prideful, her expression smug as the others looked on gob smacked.

As the *Jade Shadow* grew nearer to the planet, *it* finally noticed them. Whether or not it recognized Vergere, or whether it was too preoccupied with its defenses. It lashed out with a powerful psychic blow, and the crew of the *Jade Shadow* lost consciousness.

([{VII}]) ([{VII}])

As Anakin regained consciousness, he could hear Vergere on the comm-line talking with someone. A check on everyone else showed that Jacen was likewise waking up from whatever had incapacitated them. Luke and Mara were still down, and Jaina was in the pilot's seat.

"Jaina?" Anakin said, picking himself off the deck ground.

"Have a good nap?" Jaina remarked.
"What happened?" Jacen said, blinking as he saw the upper atmosphere of Zonama Sekot fill the viewport.
"Zonama Sekot happened," Vergere replied, motioning to the communications equipment. "Sekot wished to ensure that you truly meant no harm. It recognized me and I reassured it of our intentions."
"Sekot?" Jacen cocked his head.
"That is the name of the consciousness," Vergere's head bobbed. "Zonama is the planet."
"You didn't mention this before?" Anakin dusted off his hands.
"There was no need. Zonama Sekot is hard enough for most to comprehend without actually seeing it," Vergere said. "Although, from what I can see, it has definitely grown since I last saw it."
"What about Uncle Luke and Aunt Mara?" Anakin motioned to their 'adult' chaperones.
"They will awake when Sekot wishes it," Vergere fluttered her arms slightly. "Sekot's will is stronger than when I last saw it too."
"And the Yuuzhan Vong?" Jacen asked, realizing that the battle had ended and that he could only see small bits and pieces of coral disintegrating as they rained down from orbit.
"Gone," Vergere answered. "If I knew how to work the recording device on your ship, I would have allowed you to see what transpired. Needless to say, the Yuuzhan Vong were destroyed to the last ship."
"Oh."
"Oh," Vergere repeated with a smile.
"What can of welcoming can we expect?" Jaina interrupted. "I'm bringing the ship around for the final approach to the coordinates those people on the ground gave us."
"Welcoming?" Vergere tilted her head. "Such a curious phrase. Image that you are a people trying to hide from the galaxy, from war and strife, and that in a span of a couple of hours, two different races find you and bring despair to your people."
"We're not bringing despair," Anakin argued.
"No? Then I suppose you aren't coming to inform Sekot that she has to leave this sanctuary and aid in a galactic war waged by your people and the Far Outsiders. That it is time for Sekot to stop hiding and embracing life, and instead move on and embrace death."
"Well…when you put it that way," Anakin said faintly.
"Exactly. Now can you imagine the 'welcome' you will receive?"
"Yeah." Both Anakin and Jacen nodded.

"Vergere," Jacen said. "Is there any way you can convince Sekot to wake Luke and Mara. They are the authority within the Jedi Order, and it will be great to have their feedback and approval."
"I can, but I won't," Vergere said smoothly.
"Oh?"
"Oh," Vergere refrained from elaborating any further.
"Vergere, both Uncle Luke and Aunt Mara are the backbone of the Jedi Order. They can help legitimize any deals we make, lend us their wisdom," Jacen tried to persuade the Fosh.
"If they are the backbone, then the three of you are just chopped liver?" Vergere chortled softly at her own joke. "You misjudge your importance in the Order. Are you not Jacen Solo, member of the High Council and son of two war heroes? And can you tell me, Jacen Solo, what wisdom can the young Masters offer when it comes to communicating with a sentient planet?"
Jacen's mouth opened and closed several times as he failed to come up with an answer.
Vergere divided her attention to Jaina and Anakin. "And were the three of you not pronounced pillars of the new Jedi Order during your Knighting…ceremony?" Vergere huffed in disapproval at the last word. "Unless you think that your aunt and uncle will distrust your judgment, they are simply superfluous at this time. Sekot has no desire to meet either of them, but it is keenly interested in meeting you three. Especially Anakin."
"Me?"
"Yes, you," Vergere said with an enigmatic grin.
The *Jade Shadow* touched down with a slight shudder in a broad, grassy field surrounded on all sides by steep forest walls. Jaina killed the engines with a flick of a switch, and exhaled broadly.
"Well, we're here."
"Welcome to Zonama Sekot," Vergere chimed, activating the ship's hatch.
Outside, life swirled through the branches of the towering trees in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Various animals bellowed and bayed, birds squawked and tweeted. Insects, some as large as a person's head, flitted about equally massive sized flowers. Occupying half the sky above was the massive outline of Mobus, the gas giant Zonama was currently orbiting.
"Where…are we?" Jaina whispered in awed reverence.
"If you want a name, this place is referred to as the Middle Distance," Vergere answered.

"But in your stories…wasn't all this destroyed when the Yuuzhan Vong were last here?" Jacen gaped. "The trees here have to be centuries old to get to that height. Yet barely half a century has passed."
"Why do you seem so surprised?" Vergere cocked her head. "You have seen something similar on Kalee. The Force potential of one person can affect the life in the surrounding area so that it grows or dies. What do you think will occur with an entire, sentient planet; capable of feeling the Force in ways we can only hope to one day imagine? Just as the Force nexus on Kalee encouraged the growth of the surrounding area, so too does Sekot, but on a much grander scale."
The three younger Jedi could only look at the vast expanse in amazement. And it was then they finally saw two individuals waiting for them in front of a narrow gap in the trees. Both were tall and thin, with icy, pale blue skin and wide gold-black eyes. The male individual had an untamed mat of black hair, while his female counterpart wore her dark hair tied in a long ponytail that dangled at her hips. Where the male was wearing all white clothing, the female's garments were entirely black.
"Our greeting committee," Vergere chortled once more. "Come, let's not keep them waiting."
As they stepped off the landing ramp and into the knee-high grass for the first time, they inhaled the cool and crisp air carried by the gently breeze. It was hard for the three younger Jedi to believe that they were actually standing on Zonama Sekot.
The two strangers approached.
"You have returned, Vergere," the dark-haired woman said, greeting Vergere like one would greet a long lost friend.
"I have indeed," Vergere stepped out of the embrace, a pleased expression on her face. "You have fared well since I last saw you, Sekot."
"Wait a minute, she's Sekot?" Jaina blurted.
The woman blinked slowly. "I am. And who would you be?"
"Jaina, Jaina Solo. But aren't you…well…the planet?"
The woman smiled patiently. "I am."
"As if you were talking to an insect crawling on your arm, Sekot's consciousness is capable of changing forms in order for us to comprehend Sekot's words," Vergere explained.
The woman nodded. "If this form does not please you, then perhaps this might."
She seemed to dissolve into thousands upon thousands of tiny particles before their eyes, like whirlwind of pollen and plant matter

undulating and spinning in front of them. The particles coalesced into another form, a young boy around twelve years of age.
"Wizard, huh?" The boy grinned at the gob smacked expressions of the three teens. The young boy dissolved and became the dark-haired, blue-skinned, woman once more. "I can assume the form of whoever I wish, provided that I have interacted and bonded with them in some way. I had intended to test you, on the advice of the Ferroans, but Vergere has vouched for you and we have fond memories of her the last time she was here."
"And I have fond memories being here," Vergere replied with a respectful tilt of her head.
"We will not abuse that trust," Jacen said solemnly.
"Thank you…"
"Jacen," Jacen supplied.
"Jacen," Sekot inclined her head politely. Sekot turned her gold-black gaze to Anakin.
"I'm Anakin Solo."
"'Anakin'?"
"That boy you were earlier," Anakin said knowingly. "He was also Anakin, wasn't he?"
"He was," Sekot changed forms back to the younger Anakin Skywalker. "He and his Master stayed here for some time before leaving." The young boy's piercing blue eyes held the gazes of the three Solos. "I sense some of him in each of you."
"He was our grandfather," Jaina said.
"And the male onboard your ship?"
"Our uncle, his son," Jacen answered.
"It is good to feel him again, even if it is only echoes embedded within his grandchildren."
"Sekot," Vergere spoke up. "We are here to unfortunately bring grim tidings."
"You speak of the Far Outsiders. I was surprised to see them after so long."
"We seek your aid," Jacen said. "In order to end the war consuming this galaxy."
Sekot nodded slowly. "I am but one planet amongst millions. The Ferroans, as dedicated as they are, are not soldiers. Any actions I take will endanger them and myself. As you saw earlier, though I can defend myself, I am not invulnerable."
"Sekot, will it not be better if we send them away?" The male Ferroan entreated. "They wish to destroy the peace was have so carefully created."

"*We* didn't bring the Yuuzhan Vong here," Jaina pointed to the sky. "If the stories my brothers have learned are true, then this is the second time they have found you. They'll find you again. You cannot hide what is coming. Today's events prove that. The only question you ask yourself is, do you want to be alone when they return, or do you want to have friends that can help defend you?"
"We don't need your help," the Ferroan hissed. "Everything was fine before you all came here!"
"Now Darak," Sekot said gently. She looked back to the Jedi. "You must forgive him. His apprehensions will be echoed by many other Ferroans; and they are not unjustified. We have seen unstable times in the past —especially during the Crossings, when we searched for a new home. There was much death, famine, plagues. I did what I could to shelter them, but the chaos and devastation was great. It has only been recently that we have been able to live in peace."
"We understand," Jacen said sympathetically. "I don't think I'd want to go to war either if I had a nice little cozy place in this galaxy to live out the rest of my days in peace. But like my sister said, this little corner isn't safe anymore. It is why, among other things, we wish to talk with you about the Yuuzhan Vong… the Far Outsiders."
Sekot regard Jacen for a long moment, then blinked. "Very well. We will return to the village and have our discussions there. The son of Anakin Skywalker and his wife will be permitted to join us. They are waking as we speak."
"Thank you."
Sekot inclined her head. "Darak will lead you. I wish to speak with Vergere to learn of her experiences among the Far Outsiders."
The three younger Jedi nodded. Looking back to the *Jade Shadow*, they could see both Luke and Mara cautiously emerge from the ship. The Jedi Masters relaxed upon seeing the trio and approached the small group.
"So," Mara began, her eyes flicking to where Vergere was conversing with the dark-haired Ferroan that was Sekot, and over to the male Ferroan who was eyeing them with a mixture of distaste and fear. "What did we miss?"
([{Chapter End}])
A\N: Must be going insane, double-update again…and another scheduled for the weekend (Sat/Sun). I'm going to try to have the entire story up by early December…and a Doran/Sannah one-shot revolving around her Changing, up around the New Year.

ADA 49

Forty-Nine
([{I}]) ([{I}])

The walk to the Ferroan village had been a long one, over five standard hours, and filled with enough visual stimulus to leave the already awed Jedi in a state of stunned reverence when they finally emerged from the tampasi.

Everywhere they had looked it was as though Zonama was made up of millions upon millions of tiny universes all working in perfect harmony. The trunks of the near-sentient boras supported dozens of species of plants and fungi, which in turn provided homes and food for brightly colored insects. These iridescent insects fluttered around through the brilliant array of colored flowers and leaves, helping to spread the pollen or carry tiny seeds to a distant location. Some of the insect became a meal for the tiny lizard and arachnid-like creatures that prowled the upper boughs of the tampasi, each doing their own part in the individual eco-system that formed around each of the boras. These smaller creatures were in turn devoured by birds or larger animals, who made their nests in the higher branches, or in the ground within tangled systems of roots. Once these larger creatures passed on, their bodies provided food for the smallest of the life forms, completing the cycle of life.

This symbiotic harmony wasn't confined to just the 'wilderness.' During the trip to the village, the Jedi had seen the kybo, sentient airships piloted by Ferroans to harvest fruit from the upper reaches of the towering boras. Like a Yuuzhan Vong ship, the pilots of these kybo formed a bond to it. Unlike the Yuuzhan Vong, the bond was reciprocal, with both sides taking care of the other.

'Night' had come and gone, the shadow of the gas giant Mobus blocking out all light and allowing a whole new wave of life to shine forth. Greens, purples, and oranges lit up the forest floor all around the Jedi as creatures emerged from their daytime-hideaways and illuminated the living world with their stunning array of bioluminescence. The soft light they emitted was enough to allow the Jedi to see where they were going and was yet example of how Zonama continued to amaze and stun them.

The entire planet was teeming with life, filling the senses of the Jedi to the brim. The Force, and all of its wonders, pulsating through every cell in their bodies, permeating the air and flooding through every grain of dirt beneath their feet. Every one of their senses was on overload. The shrill calls of translucent, long-feathered birds joined with the echoing cries of the six-legged, long-tongued, insect-eating creatures

prowling through the fat leaves, and a myriad of other creatures; the natural cadence of a world in harmony sounded from all around them. Brightly colored insects, flowers, and creatures, all went about their business, ignoring the passing of the Jedi and their guide. The shapes and sizes of the life forms within the tampasi were varied and many, present everywhere one looked. It was visual proof of the magnificence of the diverse world around them.

They could smell the rich scents of the massive flowers hanging down from twisting vines, the pleasant smell of sweet fruits being wafted by the gentle breeze. The earthy odor of a forest rich with life assailed their noses with every step they took.

The feel of the soil, the pulsating rhythm of life around them. The taste of the jungle air, humid and warm. It was as though they had been enfolded into the very fabric of life that was Zonama Sekot. It was very tempting to just grow roots and sink them down into the soil to become one with the planet. Nowhere else in the galaxy was everything in such perfect harmony. Nowhere else in the galaxy did the Force reverberate so strongly through each and every living thing around them.

And we're asking the Ferroans, we're asking Sekot, to give up this balance, Anakin thought sadly, holding out a finger and marveling at the emerald green butterfly that had landed on it. The Jedi had arrived at the village several hours ago and received a fairly frosty welcome from the occupants. It was clear that the Ferroans were not at all keen about leaving their cozy little corner of the galaxy. While Luke, Mara, and Vergere continued talks with Sekot, Jaina, Jacen, and himself had been allowed to explore the immediate area around the village. It was how Anakin found himself reclined against a large rock in the middle of an open field of flowers.

"Whatcha doing?" a young Ferroan girl's voice startled Anakin from his thoughts.

Anakin glanced about and saw one of the blue-skinned Ferroan's staring at him with wide-eyed innocence through reeds of grass taller than herself.

"Just thinking," Anakin said with a smile. "How about you?"

"Just watchin'," she said, her black-gold eyes almost sparkling in the light of the sun. "Are you really a Jedi? The older ones tell stories about them all the time."

"You could say so," Anakin shrugged.

"And you have two lightsabers?"

"Huh?" Anakin glanced at where she was pointing and realized that he had left his red-bladed one clipped to his belt, right behind his lambent saber.

"I guess I do."
"What color are they?" She asked, taking several, cautious steps closer to him.
"Do you want to see?"
"Oh no," the girl shook her head. "They're dangerous!"
"That's true," Anakin said. "But Jedi don't need lightsabers to be dangerous."
The girl nodded in agreement. "Anakin killed a Blood Carver without one."
Anakin Solo blinked. "Huh?"
"Anakin," the girl said. "He killed a Blood Carver and he didn't need a lightsaber."
"When was this?" Anakin said slowly.
"When he came with his Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi to see the ships," the girl said. "At least that's what the stories told by the older people say. They say that you're also Anakin. Can *you* kill without a lightsaber too?"
"If I had to protect someone," Anakin nodded. Though he wasn't as surprised that his grandfather and Obi-Wan had come to the planet, after all, Ahsoka had told him this when he had met her, he was a little surprised that Anakin Skywalker had killed someone without a lightsaber. Going by the image of the young boy Sekot had taken the form of, his grandfather couldn't have been older than thirteen when he had done so. "Was Anakin protecting someone when he killed that Blood Carver?"
"Uh huh, the Magister, when she was a little girl," the young Ferroan's head bobbed as she referred to the spiritual leader of the Ferroan people and their primary 'medium' through which the Ferroans communicated with Sekot.
"Oh, then it's…" Anakin trailed off as he felt something wrong with his surroundings. He quickly glanced back to the little girl. "What's your name?"
"Tescia."
"Okay, Tescia. It's going to be very important that you listen to what I say," Anakin said slowly, as to not alarm her. "Can you please come here and stand up on this rock? Bad people are coming and I don't want you to get hurt."
Though she looked at him suspiciously, she nodded once and clambered up onto the rock Anakin had been leaning against.
Seconds ticked by.
Anakin loosened his red lightsaber.
"*Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"*

The red blade flashed through the air and sliced apart a lunging warrior in mid-air. Another warrior burst out of the tall grass, grabbing Anakin's saber arm and forcing the weapon from the Jedi's hand. Anakin head-butted the warrior, then kicked him away. With a flourish, he activated his purple lightsaber, and impaled the warrior when the Yuuzhan Vong tried to charge again.

Two more warriors erupted out of the surrounding grass, one of them hurling an amphistaff. Anakin deflected the flying weapon and whirled around to avoid the slashing attack of the second warrior. His purple saber flashed once more, and the second warrior fell to the ground without a head.

Another two warriors emerged to support the surviving one. Anakin effortlessly glided between their attacks and downed them one by one. Just when the battle appeared to be his victory, however, a startled cry rang out.

"Drop your lightsaber *Jeedai*, or I will kill the girl!" The last warrior of the group snarled.

Anakin spun around to see that the scarred warrior was holding a coufee to Trescia's neck. The golden-black eyes of the Ferroan girl were wide with terror as the warrior tightened his grip on her small form.

"Drop it!"

"Alright!" Anakin held out his arms to his side and let his lambent saber fall from his hands.

The warrior sneered victoriously and moved to finish off the girl with his coufee. "Foolish *Jeed..."*

The blade began to dig in, but the look of victory suddenly disappeared as the warrior found himself unable to breathe. The coufee tumbled out of his hand, and his grip on Tescia slackened. The warrior staggered, eyes bulging in agony. Flailing, he collapsed to his knees and gasped for air. Tescia was able to wiggle free, and promptly darted behind Anakin's legs for shelter.

Anakin, in the meantime, looked on dispassionately, using the Force to compress the air around the warrior with an ever-closing hand. Much like Tahiri had done to the shapers when she had been captured on Yavin 4, he was using the very air around the warrior to compact and crush the warrior's vital organs, deny the warrior's lungs the oxygen it so desperately needed. The warrior wheezed, gasped, capillaries in his eyes bursting, blood beginning to drip from his ruptured eardrums. And with a final closed fist, there was a popping noise, and the warrior collapsed like a limp puppet, all of his vital internal organs bursting at once from the intense pressure.

Slowly, Anakin unclenched his fist. "It's okay now," Anakin said to the girl hiding in his shadow. "He won't hurt you anymore."
Anakin summoned both of his lightsabers into his hands and turned around. It was then he saw his gob smacked audience. All of whom had rushed over upon feeling his initial conflict with the Yuuzhan Vong warriors.
Anakin glanced at Vergere, his siblings, aunt, and uncle. "Oh Sithspit."
([{II}]) ([{II}])
"A swearing contest?" Doran chuckled, watching Mereel Skirata host one of the many competitions occurring around the general area of the Kyrimorut.
"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I came up with the idea of a competition between clans," Sannah said with a giggle as Mandalorians from several different clans began reciting swear words first in Mando'a, then in the various languages they were familiar with.
The two young Jedi were seated at a large banquet table that had been brought out to accommodate the many hungry Mandalorians who had showed up for the first ever inter-clan physical and mental athletics competition. The name still had much to be desired, but at least the competition was an undeniable success.
There were nearly a dozen clans present, with representatives from other clans arriving as word of mouth spread. In addition to their usual competitiveness and clan-rivalries, the Mandalorians all seemed eager to prove their worth and get their minds off of the coming invasion.
Needless to say, Sannah's idea had been fully embraced by all who arrived. The puzzles and various competitions had been put together by Etain Skirata, Mereel, and Sannah, with help from the rest of Clan Skirata. There were Mandalorians scaling the sheer cliff face Doran had looked over days before. Mandalorians shooting targets from moving speeders. Mandalorians wrestling in hand-to-hand combat. And then there were others who were programming droids to fight not only each other, but also to take on other Mandalorians. Mandalorians in deathtraps who had to slice their way into a variety of computers to escape. And Mandalorians on hunting expeditions with only a vibroblade and a loin cloth.
There were also other, non-military challenges for the civilian families who had come. Cooking competitions—which had Fi and Atin as two of the judges—races, swimming, and the like, were interspersed in the area around the Kyrimorut. The event had truly become a 'family' outing.
Doran's and Sannah's attentions were rooted on one spot in particular. In the ring for 'best duelist,' Dinua was successfully fending off three

larger, bulkier Mandalorians as they sparred with quarterstaffs. Naturally, being Mandalorian quarterstaffs, shock-prods had been affixed to either end. Dinua's quarterstaff buzzed loudly as the tip of her staff made contact with the back of one of her opponents. Then buzzed again as it impacted with the mid-section of another. The third, trying to overwhelm her with his sheer size and power, had his head jerked back as Dinua jammed the quarterstaff directly into his chin. As other Mandalorians dragged the three unconscious Mandos to a pile of seven other stunned competitors, others glanced encouragingly at each other; neither wanting to be the next person to face Dinua, but not wanting to be seen backing down from her either.

"*Ade*," Sannah sighed, much to Doran's amusement. She looked to him. "You'll be okay if I go teach the Mando's how it's done?"

Doran let out a laugh. "Yeah. Go ahead."

Sannah left, and Jintar took her place. "Twenty credits Sannah won't last five minute with Dinua."

Doran raised an eyebrow and made a counter offer. "Fifty credits Sannah will win."

Jintar glanced back to the fighting ring. The mocha-skinned Melodie teen had shrugged off her outer robe, leaving her in a dark tank-top that exposed her midsection and a loose pair of pants. She picked up one of the discarded shock-staffs and tested its weight. Dinua seemed to welcome Sannah with a grin, twirling her shock-staff intimidatingly. Sannah wasn't fazed, though, and the two teens squared off as other Mandalorians came to watch. "You're on."

The action was every bit as fast, if not faster, than when Dinua was facing the three Mandalorians. Even without using the Force, Sannah was a blur. The clacks and hisses of their shock-staffs meeting were rapid-fire in their pace. The few Mandalorians who had been joking about Sannah's participation fell silent, their jaws dropping. Even after going through her ten opponents, Dinua hadn't broken a sweat. Now, however, her blue eyes were sharp with concentration as she countered, then defended against Sannah's accurately aimed strikes.

"Is it too late to take back that bet?" Jintar whistled.

"Go ahead," Doran said absently, likewise shocked at the display. He had yet to see Sannah in action beyond the training lessons they had been giving to Clan Skirata and the neighboring clans. He had known Dinua would be an excellent teacher for Sannah. What he hadn't realized was just *how* excellent a teacher the Mandalorian teen would be.

The silence in the clearing spread, interrupted only by the vigorous clacking and hissing of the shock-staffs. A growing audience was

forming as Sannah surpassed the time mark her three predecessors had set. There was one solid clack of the staffs, and both broke in two at the exact same time. Rather than stop and get new staffs, Sannah and Dinua continued their match, alternating their fighting styles to accommodate their dual staves.
Overhand.
Underhand.
Side-swipe.
Upwards slash.
Dinua and Sannah were practically mirror images of each other. A sheen of sweat had built on their foreheads and their faces were masks of concentration. Sannah managed to knock one half of Dinua's staff out of the Mandalorian teen's hand, but then lost half of her own staff to a spinning kick. They glanced at their remaining halves, smirked at each other, and then discarded them.
Dinua walked back to her pack and pulled out a vibroblade, and Sannah retrieved the blade Boba Fett had given her. In a flash, both were back in action, their blades humming as they swept through the air. By the time the match was over, with both vibroblades humming at the necks of the opponents, all the other competitions in the area had been abandoned.
Breathing heavily, Dinua offered Sannah a brief smirk. "Not bad, for a *Jetii*."
"Not so bad yourself," Sannah remarked. "Looks like we gained an audience."
Dinua glanced about the dozens of Mandalorians staring at them. "Looks like we did."
"Ladies and gentlemen, I think we can agree that these two ladies win the award for duelist," Mereel announced dryly, earning a round of laughter.
Sannah and Dinua grinned and waved good-naturedly as they received cheers and curses from those amazed by their abilities. As a reward for their accomplishments, wreaths of metal trinkets—designed by the children of the different clans participating—were set atop their heads. Crowned and satisfied, both young women made their way back to the dining table, as the other competitions resumed.
"Good fight?" Jintar said as Dinua dropped into the empty space next to him.
"Have fun?" Doran asked Sannah, as the Melodie teen filled the space on his opposite side and took a drink out of the cup he was holding.
"Definitely," both teenage girls smirked. "Care to go up against us?"

"We're not suicidal," Jintar shook his head and glanced at his cup. "Or drunk enough, yet."
"This competition is definitely turning out to be a huge success," Doran motioned to where Mandalorian children were flying and battling paper kites while their parents either looked on or participated in competitions of their own. "It's great that they can all get a breather before the Vong come."
"How about you, Doran?" Dinua said. "You enjoying your breather too?"
Knowing what she was really asking, Doran smiled faintly. "Yeah. It's been ages since I've just been able to sit back and truly relax."
Sannah leaned into him empathetically, and he drew on the strength she was lending him. His mind flashed back to that night after Dinua had found him outside the Kyrimorut. Though it was nearly a week ago, it was still fresh on his mind.
"There you are!"
"Hey Fish-Girl." He looks up from the cot he had just sunk back into.
"Doran..." She pauses, seeing his eyes reddened from crying and his hunched-over posture. She doesn't need the Force to see that he is suffering. "Are you okay?"
"No," he emits a weak laugh. "Not nearly."
He could feel her apprehension. It was understandable. Out of all the years they had known each other, this is the first time she was seeing him in such a state. He squeezes his eyes shut, mentally cursing. This isn't how he wants to start off the conversation.
The cot shifts as Sannah sits down next to him. He can feel one of her cool hands slip into his hot and sweat-slickened one. She doesn't say anything. Just sits there holding his hand and keeping their Force bond wide open. It takes all his effort not to break down again. Force, he's so pathetic.
"*Ouch!" Doran jerks when Sannah lightly thumps his arm. "What was that for?"*
Sannah's yellow eyes darken. "You're not pathetic."
"*Warriors aren't supposed to cry. They're supposed to take any pain and suck it up," Doran says hoarsely, looking away from her lest she see the fresh tears forming. Despite the reassurance he had received from Dinua, all the doubts and uncertainties had returned as his childhood best friend stared him down. Even more so, because where Dinua was a Mandalorian and he had been determined to at least save some face in front of her, Sannah had been with him much longer.*
"Real warriors aren't supposed to have mental breakdowns even when they're safe, among allies, and know that there is no danger. We're supposed to be...strong. Supposed to have backbone."

"Well, you're definitely not a jellyfish," Sannah says lightly, leaning into him and suffusing the area around him with her Force presence. "You're not a Mando either, so drop the 'warriors are supposed to' dung. Even if you were, and had that 'warriors are tough' fodder drilled into your head, you would also know that it's no shame to ask your friends help. That it's one thing to be strong against your own personal demons, but it takes another type of strength entirely to admit that you can't fight them anymore by yourself."

Silence ticks by, with Doran finally letting the tears fall from his eyes, his body shuddering as he fights back a sob.

"I'm scared," Doran whispers, keeping his eyes squeezed closed, trying to disappear into Sannah's comforting Force embrace. Physically, he tries to remain as stone-like as possible. But it's for naught. He begins to shake as the leering faces of the Yuuzhan Vong shapers once again appear in his mind. His breathing becomes ragged, and his hands ball up into fists. "Every time I close my eyes, I see them. I hear them. Remember every moment of pain."

Doran, in his state of distress, was oblivious to the maelstrom of Force energy being whipped about by his anxiety. Objects rattle and float in the air. The walls bow outwards, and the door begins to crumple in on itself. Unfazed, Sannah wraps both her arms around his bare torso, hugging him tightly. "Come back to me, Adventure Boy. You're here, safe. No one can hurt you. I won't let anyone hurt you. The shapers are gone. It's over."

The litany of whispered reassurances continues, dueling with the Yuuzhan Vong hisses replaying in his mind. Sannah keeps her arms securely around him; the feel of her comforting presence overriding the sensations from his tormented memory. Doran finally lets out a strangled sound as he forces his eyes open. The whispers in Yuuzhan Vong, the faces, the pain, all evaporate. He vaguely hears the chair and desk in his quarters fall back to the ground, choosing instead to focus on the soothing gaze of his childhood best friend. She offers him a weak smile. "Hey there."

"Hey," Doran mutters, looking down at his feet as he desperately tries to control his breathing.

Sannah gently reaches up to angle his gaze back to her face. "I'm going to be at your side the entire way, Adventure Boy. We're going to get through this together."

Doran exhales again, shifting so that he could recline in his cot. Sannah's Force presence continued to surround him in a protective shield, the younger teen still hugging him reassuringly. "Yeah."

Sannah tucks herself against his side and he delves fully into the Force-bond, using it to selfishly share the truckloads of nightmares and memories that had been eating away at him. Sannah stiffens at first, but then nuzzles him. "Feel better?"
"A little."
"Get some sleep then," Sannah whispers. "I'll stop those bad dreams from coming."
Doran feels the exhaustion of his emotional outburst get to him. Almost fearfully, he allows his eyes to flutter shut once more. Before they did, he can see the outline of his mother, Jintar, and Dinua, standing in the now crumpled doorway of his quarters. He tries to give them the best reassuring smile he could muster, but sleep claims him before he could tell if it worked or not.
True to her word, Sannah had stayed awake all night, warding any of the negative memories and emotions away to ensure that he had the first real sleep since he had awoken from his trance.
Doran draped an arm around his Melodie girlfriend and she smiled gently. She had rarely been far from his side since that night, and he owed her much. As if reading his mind, she tilted her head up and gave him a brief kiss.
The scene around them was one of merriment, happiness. Families were conversing. Children were playing, their laughter filling the air. Food, pleasant smelling aromas, wafting from giant fire pits. It was as if there wasn't a care in the world. As if the threat of an eminent Yuuzhan Vong invasion didn't exist.
Doran's eyes fluttered close as he once again synced himself into the life currents of the planet. The vibrant pulses of plant, animal, and *Mando'ade* alike coming together in harmony. And in another week, that harmony would be disrupted. The Yuuzhan Vong would come. In another two weeks. All of what he saw in front of him would cease to exist.
"Doran, you're floating the food dishes," Jintar drawled.
Doran's concentration broke, and Jintar let out a squawk as one of the levitating dishes spilled out over his head.
"Alright, that does it. Infirm or not, you can still fire a blaster," Jintar said, brushing the food off. "The girls can obviously kick our butts in close combat. But I *know* I'm still better than you at taking down targets."
With a supportive nudge from Sannah, Doran grinned. "Fine, but don't go whining if I end up ahead of you."
"Says the number three ranked Mando'ade of our class," Jintar retorted.

Doran rolled his eyes, but walked with Jintar over to the targets. As the crowds cheered around them, Doran checked the charge on his blaster and took aim. Maybe for now he could forget about the Vong. They were still a week away after all.

([{III}]) ([{III}])

Tahiri was lounging in the tiny mess area aboard the *No Luck Required*, waiting for the ship to get underway once more. The downside of heading to Mandalore was that it was fairly deep in Yuuzhan Vong territory. This meant dovin basal mines along every single hyperspace route to slow their progress. It also meant the occasional coralskipper squadron lying in wait along with the mines. Fortunately, the combined firepower of the *Jade Shadow, Pulsar Skate, Millennium Falcon, No Luck Required*, and the various science and supply ships accompanying them, was more than enough to ward off these attacks. Unfortunately, repeatedly being yanked out of hyperspace played havoc on the ships' hyperdrives and stabilizers, and time was needed to readjust their settings.

"Just got a message from the *Falcon*," Uldir Lochett said brightly, entering the room. "We should be on our way in another hour."

"Hello to you too," Tahiri chirped.

"Hello," Uldir rolled his eyes, bending down to open a refrigerator unit. "There was also another message from the *Pulsar Skate*. Master Horn is blaming you and Anakin for the latest adventures the other apprentices have just gotten in to."

"Other apprentices?"

"Valin and Jysella's friends. Apparently Seff, Barv, Natua, and Yaqeel somehow managed to coerce Master Tresina Lobi and a pair of freelance mercs, Remis and Qorl, to check out the long-range communication's center at Esfandia. They got word from the Ryn network that the Yuuzhan Vong were making a run for it and decided to go out there and do something about it."

"What happened?" Tahiri gasped.

"They're fortunate the Imperials were nearby to help out," Uldir said with a disbelieving shake of his head. "With the help of the Imperials, some Freed Ones within the attacking fleet, and some good old fashion luck, they managed to turn back the Yuuzhan Vong attack, foil a bomb plot by a Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator, and successfully protect the main communication hub that connections the Unknown Regions, Wild Space, and the rest of the galaxy."

Tahiri blinked at Uldir with wide eyes. "Oh."

"I'm no expert on Jedi stuff, but I think the next generation of Jedi is definitely giving the previous one more than a few gray hairs," Uldir laughed, emerging from the refrigerating unit and opening a drink can.
"Wait, did you say Remis and Qorl?" Tahiri said, her mind falling back on Uldir's story.
"Yup, or at least that's what that Valin Horn kid reported. Why?"
"Those two are the reason Anakin and I got out of Yavin Four when the Yuuzhan Vong captured me," Tahiri said with a faint laugh of disbelief.
"Wow, I can't believe they're still partnered up and running around in the galaxy."
"Speaking of partners," Uldir took a seat on a flimsy plastic deck chair. His expression turned serious and he held Tahiri's gaze gratefully. "I just want to thank you for what you're doing with Klin-Fa. I knew she was hurting and I had been going crazy trying to find some way to help her. She's very independent and probably thought I wouldn't sense her turmoil if she blocked me out. But since she's started those Vongsense lessons with you though, she's slowly been letting me in. Thank you."
"I didn't do much," Tahiri said modestly. "I just wanted to help a friend."
"Well, just keep on doing it, please," Uldir smiled, leaning back in his chair and looking at Tahiri in amazement. "Force, you're definitely not that nine-year old tag-along that I remember."
"And you're not obsessed with finding adventure and running all over the galaxy anymore," Tahiri grinned.
"I don't have to find adventure, it finds me," Uldir shook his head ruefully. "And the poor crew of this ship wonders why we're eternally broke. Any stipends we get go right back into our repair budget."
"The glorious life of a rescue pilot," Tahiri giggled.
"Beats flying a one-man fighter against impossible odds. And rescuing people feels a whole lot better than killing people."
"Boss Boy, Other Human," Leaft announced his presence.
"Grumpy Dug," Tahiri inclined her head in response.
Leaft seemed surprised at Tahiri's retort, then grinned wickedly.
"Pushy human, I'll have you know that I've personally piloted one of those Vong ships. After what it did with my head, I have a right to be grumpy."
"You piloted a ship?" Tahiri was taken aback.
"It was simple," the Dug's chest puffed up and he buffed his nails on his tunic. "I thought about moving it one way, it obeyed."
"Must have been one of the coralskippers," Tahiri said with a nod. "They're designed so that even idiots can fly them."
Uldir hid his laughter as Leaft deflated faster than a popped balloon.

"Well I used the coralskipper and caused its mothership to crash, saving everyone on this ship," Leaft scowled, walking forward on his upper limbs to glare at Tahiri. "That's after I outsmarted the Vong commander and bested him in hand-to-hand combat with one broken arm."
"Which Domain?" Tahiri continued to play along, looking unimpressed. She had already heard the entire story from Klin-Fa. "Because if it was one of those minor ones like Qat or Qalu, they were always better trackers than they were fighters. Beating them up is as easy as buying broken droids from Jawas."
Now it was Leaft's turn to be surprised. He scowled at Tahiri for a long minute, before breaking out into a laugh and wagging a finger at her. "You're not bad for one of Boss Boy's people. Unlike that other Jedi, always making kissy-faces with him."
Tahiri glanced back at Uldir, who was shaking with mirth. "You're pretty funny, for a Dug."
"She'll do, Boss," Leaft nodded to Uldir. The Dug went to the food stores, pulled out some type of dried amphibian, and bit its head off as he left the room.
"Congratulations," Uldir finally managed to laugh. "You've officially won over the crew member responsible for the life support systems and other vital electronics onboard this ship."
"Who controls the guns and weapons?" Tahiri said, half in jest.
"Vook."
"The Duros?"
"Yup," Uldir nodded. "But try to be a bit more careful around him. He lost his entire family when Duro fell to the Yuuzhan Vong. The only time I've seen him anywhere close to satisfied is when we're vaping them."
Tahiri grimaced. "Don't worry, I've met plenty of people like that."
"So you plan to better this ship's crew one person at a time?" Uldir said with a grin.
"You know me, I..."
"Boss Boy, get up here!" Vega's terse voice was filled with alarm.
Tahiri and Uldir quickly scrambled to the cockpit.
"What's going on?"
"Yuuzhan Vong frigates, three of them, just jumped in system."
"Status on the hyperdrives?"
"Ours is still down. Vook and Leaft were on it."
"This is the Falcon. All ships stand down. Those are Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessels," Leia announced. *"Tahiri, you're on."*
Tahiri nodded at Vega. "Hail the lead frigate."

"Channel open."
"This is Tahiri Kwaad, avatar of Yun-Shuno hailing the commander of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong frigate."
"One-Who-Was-Shaped, I am Czalpak. The Supreme Leader heard that you were in need of soldiers and shapers for your mission. I bring both."
Tahiri grinned. Czalpak was one of the original Freed Ones she and Anakin had trained on Borleias. He and Shaeri also happened to be courting each other. Though it was a very long range relationship as he was normally stationed at Kuat and Shaeri was wherever Tahiri's adventures took her. Fortunately, Shaeri just happened to be on the *Falcon*. "Glad you can join us, Czalpak Cha. Your help is definitely appreciated."
([{IV}]) ([{IV}])
After Anakin and the others had returned to the village, it became clear that the little girl had actually been Sekot in disguise. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors had been survivors of a ship that had been shot down, and had been deliberately herded by the planet towards Anakin to test his reaction. Though Anakin had passed the planet's test, needless to say, the rest of his family wasn't so enthusiastic as to *how* he had passed the test.
"Sekot didn't see anything wrong with your grandfather killing with the Force either," Mara pointed out from her position at the dining table in the small house they had been loaned.
"That's because there wasn't," Anakin said. "Anakin Skywalker killed in self-defense."
"I know you might have views to the contrary, Anakin, but killing with the Force is crossing a line that can't be uncrossed," Mara scowled. "There won't ever be a reason where killing with the Force is a good thing."
"And not only yourself, but think about Sekot," Luke added, concern creasing his forehead. "The planet already believes that it's acceptable to kill with the Force. Saw fit to see if *you* would do the same. Just what type of lesson do you think Sekot will learn from you now that you've repeated Anakin Skywalker's actions?"
"What other choice did I have at the time?" Anakin said incredulously. "That warrior was going to slit Tescia's throat regardless of what I did. Should I have tried to talk him down? Invite him for dinner? I had to make a choice, and I'd make the same choice over and over again."
"That's what worries me the most," Luke spoke up sharply. "Once Tescia was free, you didn't have to continue your attack. At that moment, the warrior was disarmed and helpless. You could have taken

him prisoner at that point, but you didn't. You didn't just kill him, you executed him."
"And should I have left him to Sekot or the Ferroan's then?" Anakin raised an eyebrow. "What do you think *they* would have done? Sekot was obviously saving those Yuuzhan Vong for that conflict, and it was clear from the space battle that Sekot wanted them dead."
"Which is why this trip is making me rethink our initial plan," Luke said sternly. "What if, in trying to end the war, we create a greater evil?"
"Greater evil?" Jacen raised an eyebrow.
"Sekot is still relatively young and naïve when it comes to the Force," Luke said. "The incident with Anakin proves that. What will become of Sekot if we introduce a war-like species to it after all these years of Sekot knowing only the Ferroans? What if Sekot decides that killing with the Force is an acceptable act and falls to the dark side after being influenced by the actions of the Yuuzhan Vong?"
"Who are you to dictate what it might or might not do?" Vergere huffed, surprisingly coming to Anakin's aid. "Sekot is a mind far greater than our own. A creature more complex than we have ever seen. It's presence in the Force is incomprehensible to our limited minds. Sekot is capable of using the Force in ways we can only imagine. What gives us the right to judge Sekot? To limit its growth and experience to things only *we* wish it to learn?"
"And if Sekot should fall to the dark side?" Mara challenged. "If we continue to recklessly allow the sort of conclusions it has made regarding Anakin Skywalker to influence its judgment? You said it yourself. Sekot exists in the Force in a far greater way. I can't even fathom the damage a dark side planet can inflict."
"So you would force Sekot to your antiquated line of thinking?" Vergere tilted her head. "You would feed Sekot the same drivel you have been teaching your knights and apprentices. The previous Jedi Order fell because of their short-sightedness and close-mindedness. I can already see that this order will meet the same fate, for the same reasons."
"We're not forcing anything onto Sekot," Luke said with a mild raise of his eyebrow. "And I'm sure Sekot is more than wise enough to consider the consequences of using the Force for darker purposes. What we *are* worried about is that Sekot seems to believe that the actions of the two Anakins is acceptable and beyond reproach. Sekot is an immensely powerful and unique being, but who will call it out when it makes a mistake, when it begins to go astray?"
"In both cases, the Anakin involved saved another," Vergere pointed out, not answering Luke. "In both cases, using a lightsaber was out of the question and one would have died if the Anakin didn't do as they

did. Would it have been so different if they used the Force to throw the Blood Carver or warrior off a cliff?"
"But neither of them did," Mara said. "Instead, they used the Force to inflict deliberate harm on their target. The Force allows one to incapacitate one's target. Both Anakins could have done that. Instead, they chose to kill. If you had met Luke's father when he was older, you wouldn't be so quick to defend him."
"So it doesn't matter if Anakin Skywalker or myself chose to do something out of good, it's the methods we chose that have you concerned?" Anakin interjected.
"You tell me, Anakin," Mara gazed at her nephew. "We know that we taught you better than to think killing is a means to an end. That was your grandfather's way. And his shadow lingers still over the galaxy, even as we wage war against the Yuuzhan Vong. It won't be worth winning the war only to be consumed by the shadow once more. We have morals, rules, for a reason: to ensure that the Force remains balanced."
"A balanced Force means one that is equally seeped in both light and dark," Anakin noted calmly. "How can the Force remain balanced if the rules the Jedi go by completely ignore one side of it?"
Luke felt his gut twist painful as the shadow he had seen in his visions, the one wrapped around Anakin, grew all the stronger as the conversation went on. Ethereal shadowy hands reached out to crush Anakin in its grasp. Then, just as suddenly, the shadow vanished. Luke blinked once more to clear his vision. Then, realizing others were looking at him, replied to Anakin's question. "We don't ignore the dark side of the Force. As Palpatine and Vader taught us, we have to be ever vigilant for it. All of us here are aware that the natural state of the galaxy is one of darkness. By adhering to the Jedi Code, to the practices of the countless Jedi that came before us, we hold back that darkness just enough for hope and life to exist. The moment the Jedi begin to see the darkness as a more tempting state of existence, they cease being Jedi and then the balance is upset."
"Uncle, is this about Sekot, or about me?" Anakin said. "Sekot isn't a Jedi, isn't a Sith. By your definition, I'm not a Jedi either. Nor am I a Sith. Rules and regulations don't fit everyone. I never thought I'd say this, but Vergere is right about one aspect of each successive Jedi Order. They all share the flaw of marginalizing any Jedi whose view of the Force differs from that of the mainstream concepts. Dark, light, there is no fine line between the two. To know one, you must know the other. The reason why the Sith have been continuously so successful with overthrowing successive Jedi Orders is because they know all

about the 'light' side of the Force. They know how we will respond. Know how we think. Why? Because the Jedi are all forced to adhere to one set of standards. Well, to truly know the Sith, one has to know the dark side of the Force as well. Master Durron, Katarn, Solusar, even you, Aunt Mara, are all aware of what a dark Jedi can do because at one time or another you *were* that dark Jedi. Was the balance in the Force upset when you all left the dark Jedi and became light?"
"There's a difference between knowing the harm it could cause and walking away, and knowing the harm but still using the dark side anyway," Mara said tersely. "In your case, it's even more foolhardy because you are well aware of the risks."
The conversation was halted when the particles that made up Sekot's form breezed in through the doorway and took on the image of the Ferroan Magister. "Foolhardy, or brave?" Sekot said lightly. "Anakin Solo knows the risks, so he knows when he has reached his limits. He is willing to explore all aspects of the Force for the betterment of your people as a whole. Something that should be commended?"
"His actions are just a partial reason for why we're so worried," Mara said.
"Oh?" Sekot blinked owlishly. "I heard much of your debate. You fear that I will grow accustom to killing with the Force? That I will delight in my power over others and use it for ill?"
"Yes," Mara said simply.
"It is true that there is much of the Force I do not know. Why, for one, has it allowed me to gain consciousness? How is it that I have yet to meet another planet such as myself? With a thought I can control the weather, coax thousands of years of life from the seeds of the boras in a matter of months. I can even control the hyperdrives, devices not native to this planet, and alter the core's magnetic field to withstand flight through hyperspace. Yet how I do all this is a mystery," Sekot said, taking a seat opposite Anakin at the dining table. "What was I created for? Why do I exist? When we compare views, how does the Force seem in your eyes compared to my own? I have many questions and very few answers. The Ferroans do their best to accommodate me. The Magister's father was one of my teachers when I first gained consciousness. Despite his good-intentions, I know now that his view of the life flows that Jedi call the Force, was somewhat flawed."
"How did he view the Force?" Jacen spoke up, curious. He could tell that none of the Ferroans were Force aware, yet, when growing up on a planet such as Zonama Sekot, it was hard *not* to notice the powers of the Force at work.

Sekot smiled. "For one, what you call the Force, he called the Potentium. And he viewed the Potentium in almost the same way as your brother views the Force. That within every individual is the potential for good and evil. That the actions of these individuals are what either upholds the Potentium's light, or twists it into darkness."
"An entire fraction of Jedi in my time thought as he did," Vergere noted with a tilt of her head.
This got the attention of the others in the room. "What happened to them?" Mara asked.
"They were all expelled, of course," Vergere said with a glib shrug of her shoulder and a dismissive wave. "The council of my time decreed that Jedi were supposed to use the Force, the Potentium, to protect others. Not to explore the limits of what one can and cannot do with it. There were even whispers that the idea of Potentium was a ploy used by the Sith to tempt Jedi to the dark side."
"Great," Mara said sarcastically, she glanced to her nephew. "Even the older Jedi thought the Potentium was a bad idea. As if you learning it from a declared Sith wasn't bad enough."
"But you said that this view is somewhat flawed," Luke astutely pointed out to Sekot, before another argument could break out. "Can you explain why?"
"The belief of Potentium requires evil to be non-existent, replaced by a potential darkness that exists only with intent. That one can avoid the dark side by remaining completely moral. But as the Jedi have shown, true evil does exist. As for the requirement that the Force exists in all living things, the Far Outsiders have proved that there are things that stand outside of the Force. Then again, no theory is perfect, and I have formed many of my own."
"And what would they be?" Luke asked with genuine interest.
"Perhaps, I could discuss them with you at a later time," Sekot inclined her head in agreement. "I merely came here to voice my understanding of the situation. Regardless of what Anakin Skywalker became later in his life, I still have fond memories of him when he visited as a child. From the definition of a Jedi as said by the Jedi Council during Vergere's time, a Jedi uses the Force to protect others. Both he and his grandson used their abilities to protect another and have thus fulfilled that aspect of being a Jedi. Neither killed out of hate or anger, and both had only the best intentions in mind.
It is easy to criticize their means after the fact, but the fact remains that both of the Anakins protected their charge and the aggressors in both cases can no longer hurt another. It all simply comes down to trust. Do you trust Anakin Solo to make the right decisions, especially if

the fate of this galaxy hangs in the balance? Do you trust me to continue to act as a guardian of the Force, and safeguard the Ferroans and Far Outsiders? Please think on this. The hour is late and I am sure that some sleep will help soothe frayed nerves. I look forward to our conversations about the Force tomorrow."
With that, Sekot dissipated into particles once more, carried out of the house by a faint breeze.
([{V}]) ([{V}])
"Okay, got it. Thanks Lochett," Tyria nodded. She deactivated her personal comlink and glanced back to the others around the table. In the background, the sound of the second day of competition filtered into the briefing room of the Kyrimorut. "One of my allies managed to wrestle up some help. The *Millennium Falcon* is leading several privately owned vessels and three Freed Yuuzhan Vong vessels to support *Manda'yaim*. Please don't shoot these Yuuzhan Vong down. They, and a joint Alliance-Imperial taskforce, will arrive two days before the planned attack. Oh, and don't shoot the *Falcon* down either. I think the bounty on Han Solo's expired anyways."
"The Falcon?"
"Yes, *Mand'alor*," Tyria did her best to not laugh at the obvious surprise in Boba's voice.
"*I hunted him for the better part of two years, got him frozen in carbonite, shot at him countless times, used him for target practice for the militia I was training, and he still wants to come to my aid?"* Boba said in complete disbelief. "*There has to be something wrong with him."*
"He could just like you, you know," Tyria said, her smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. "I mean, after all that experience together, some type of bond must have formed."
"*Jedi Sarkin-Tainer, are you <u>trying</u> to convince me to shoot him out of the sky? I've been known to do pro bono work, you know."*
"It was just a thought," Tyria said lightly. She tapped her holopad several times. "But on a more serious note, you'll have five Imperial Star Destroyers, two more from General Garm Bel Iblis' task force, a Nebulon B and a variety of support ships at your disposal shortly. They're bringing with them several shipfulls of mines and other things that will help give the Yuuzhan Vong a bad day. I was thinking that after they lay their payloads, we could have them hide just outside the system, and wait for the Yuuzhan Vong to begin landing their troops before we jump them in."
"I agree," Verde Vizsla's hologram shimmered as the young Death Watch leader nodded while she looked over the data Tyria had sent.

"*You're bringing just enough ships to cause trouble, but not enough to win the battle outright. If it will help coordinate our attacks, I can have my own ships, with skeleton crews, join up with this taskforce."*
"That might be the best use of your ships. But if you do so, the Mandalorian moons will have little air support until our people can get there. The *Kyr'tsad* will take heavy losses."
"We're ready to do our part. You just make sure the ships get here before we're all wiped out. I'll go make the preparations now." Verde's hologram faded out.
"*With regards to evacuation of Manda'yaim and its moons, most major city centers have been emptied. Fortunately, we won't be losing hundreds of thousands of lives if one of them gets hit. Unfortunately, if the Vongese are coming to raze the planet, the populations we evacuated won't be safe, even in the countryside,"* reported an official from the government. "*We understand the necessity to preserve the mountain and underground tunnels for the Protectors. But I also don't like it. If the rest of the population is killed off, what's the point of calling them 'Protectors'? They will have protected nothing and hid while everyone else died."*
"Would you rather leave the civilians to fight the Yuuzhan Vong when the invaders land their ground forces?" Boba replied mildly. *"People can be replaced. If we lose the planet, however, we will have no right to call ourselves Mandalorians. This is war. People will die. People have to be sacrificed for the greater good. Jedi Sarkin-Tainer, do you disagree?"*
Tyria's lips thinned, but she shook her head. "No, you're right, *Mand'alor.* However, as I said earlier, there will be seven Star Destroyers and a Nebulon B arriving a few days before the attack. Though there is no guarantee that these ships will survive the coming engagement, we can evacuate the children onto them to give them a better chance of survival. The ships under Verde Vizsla's control can do the same for *Manda'yaim*'s moons. I figure that we can save at least a few tens of thousands of civilians this way. It may not be much, but it's better than none."
Boba Fett nodded his agreement to the plan.
"I'll begin preparations for the evacuation of the children then," the government official said.
"Only the children, minister," Boba reminded. *"I don't want to hear that any of our government or more influential clan members bribed their way onto one of the ships in place of a Mandalorian child."*
"Yes, Mand'alor." The official inclined his head briefly, and this stepped away out of his holo-emitter's range.

Several other logistical items were taken care of, but after Tyria's report, the briefing was largely finished. When the last of the holograms flickered out, Tyria let out a low breath.
"Impressive."
Tyria looked up to see the older Jedi, Scout, standing in the door way.
"Thanks. Believe it or not, this isn't the first defensive I've had to help prepare."
"You seemed a bit too good at it," Scout said with a smile, taking a seat at the empty conference table. "Have you given any thought about my offer from the last time you were here?"
"To allow Doran to stay and train with you, Bardan, and Kina Ha to learn the old ways?" Tyria tilted her head.
"Yes."
"Is now really the best time to discuss this?"
"I figured we'd both be too busy running around in the coming days," Scout said. "Of course, Kina Ha, Bardan, and I would be more than happy to help train Sannah as well. Our knowledge won't be much use to us once we rejoin the Force, and the more who learn, the better."
Tyria bit her lower lip. It's not that she didn't want Doran to learn 'lost' aspects of the Force, but she had scarcely been away from his side since his birth. There was no denying that Doran was growing to be a strong Jedi and kind-hearted young man, but it wasn't like Tyria wanted him to grow up so quickly. He was a huge part of her heart and she would miss his presence fiercely. It had been hard enough to let him go for the year he had gone to train with the Mandalorians. A second parting wasn't something she looked forward to. Then again, she had to let him go someday.
Tyria sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I guess this is one of the reasons why Jedi were separated from their parents at a young age."
"Among others," Scout said sympathetically. "Of course, this is all contingent on all of us surviving the coming attack."
"We'll make it through," Tyria said certainly, thinking of the future they all had waiting for them. "I'll consent to Doran and Sannah's training on one condition."
"Go on."
"Doran and I have met quite a few older Jedi who frowned upon romantic relationships; especially if it was between two Jedi…"
Scout held up a hand. "Doran and Sannah will be allowed to continue to have their relationship. I'm sure they'll even be encouraged on more than one occasion. You've probably noticed that Bardan, Kina Ha, and myself are hardly the norm when it comes to older Jedi."

Tyria laughed. "That I have. I just wanted to be clear about where I stood with them. I'm kind of fond of Sannah and I think she and Doran make a great team."
"I think so as well." Scout smiled.
"Alright, it's a deal then. Provided they agree to it, when this mess with *Manda'yaim* is over, I'll leave the two of them in your care."
"This is as much for our benefit as it is for theirs," Scout answered, standing and clasping Tyria's offered forearm. "Teachers, after all, always have something to learn from their students. And after talking to Sannah and watching your son, I think they can teach us quite a lot as well. Are you sure you do not wish to stay and learn with them?"
Tyria smiled and shook her head. "I'm honored and all. But this era is already passing to Doran and Sannah's generation. I'll remain a distraction if I stick around."
"I'll make sure they make regularly scheduled comm-chats," Scout said brightly.
"Thanks," Tyria chuckled.
"If Doran and Sannah are representative of the rest of their generation. I think the Jedi Order has a bright future ahead of it."
([{VI}]) ([{VI}])
"What's wrong?"
Anakin opened a single eye to see a young Ferroan girl crouched down in front of him.
"Sekot?"
"Uh huh," the girl nodded. "Can't you sleep? You've been awake for ages now."
"I've been thinking about what Aunt Mara and Uncle Luke were saying," Anakin muttered.
"I have too," the Ferroan girl said in a hushed voice of amazement.
"Are they right?" Anakin said. "Are they right to say that we shouldn't listen to anything the Sith have to teach us because anything the Sith say are just tricks to get us to fall to the dark side? I mean, Brisha opened my eyes to a whole other side of the Force. Taught me things about myself that I could have never learned through the teachings of Uncle Luke and the other Masters. How is that knowledge wrong?"
"They *are* right about one thing, I think," the girl climbed up into the bora and took a seat on the branch he was sitting on. "You didn't have to kill that Far Outsider. The other Anakin only killed because it was the only option left to him. You had options."
"I can't argue with a planet," Anakin said faintly. "I guess you're all right about that. It's just, when I get into that mindset, it's so hard to stop myself. The knowledge that all of the Force is completely open to

me, that I could do what I wish with it because I no longer have any limitations, it's scary sometimes. But at the same time, it's a necessity. I wouldn't have been able to use Vongsense if I just confined myself to Jedi teachings. I wouldn't have been able to save Alema and Tahiri on Kalee if I hadn't used the lessons Brisha taught me. I think Alema told me once that if something in the galaxy needed a dark touch and not a light one, I should be prepared to go down that road for the good of the galaxy."
"For the good of the galaxy, or for you?" Sekot swung her legs back and forth over the side of the branch, seemingly fascinated by the glowing insects and plants on the forest floor.
"For the galaxy, of course," Anakin sighed. "It's not like I want all the attention and everything. But if I have this power, I might as well use it to make a difference."
Sekot glanced at him out of the corner of one of her golden and black eyes. "Power does not make one great."
"Don't the Ferroans see you as some type of god? An embodiment of their Potentium?" Anakin pointed out.
Sekot changed forms, now resembling the Ferroan magister. "Those who do, do not know any better. Those who know me, however, know that I am far removed from any sort of god." Her form shifted to the younger Anakin Skywalker. "In fact, I'm a lot like you. I was created by the Force. That much I know. I can do any and everything I wish with this body of mine. I could make it rain, snow, bring the oceans higher, bring low the mountains. If the Ferroans displease me, droughts, earthquakes, floods, all sorts of natural disasters, are within my ability. But I can also accelerate the growth of the trees, cause the flowers to bloom, the trees to give their fruit, create burrows for the weaker life forms. I can tilt my axis so that the sun does not become too harsh, even jump to hyperspace to safeguard those on this planet. I have the ability to both protect and destroy with a single thought. And like you, there are very few people who can stop me if I make a decision one way or another. Like you, I desire to learn more about the Force and my purpose in this galaxy."
"Why do you choose to protect the Ferroans?"
Sekot returned to the form of the Ferroan girl. "Why do you feel guilt over killing the Far Outsider? He was a bad man. He was going to hurt me."
Anakin stared up into the starry sky. "I don't feel guilty about killing him, not really. I feel guilty that my own abilities got the better of me. Brisha taught me that I must maintain complete control over my

emotions when I use the darker side of me to fuel my attacks. This is the second time that I lost that control."
"So is your inability to safely use your 'darker side' of you because of your own failings, or because of your teacher's teachings?"
"Both? I don't know," Anakin shrugged. "Like I said earlier, Uncle Luke and Aunt Mara might have been right about Brisha. Maybe I shouldn't take any of her lessons to heart. Should just forget about everything she's taught me."
"Are those lessons so easily unlearned that you could say it and make it so?"
Anakin glanced at the doppelganger of Vergere. "No. And that's another problem. Even if I wanted to forget the lessons Brisha taught me, I couldn't. From a certain point of view, her arguments about the Force being one are true. And the fact that the Jedi always seem to fall to the Sith, and not to some other threat, is proof that there is a flaw in the teachings of the Jedi. A flaw the Sith continuously exploit. Then again, if I diverge from the teaching of the countless of generations of Jedi, will I still be a Jedi?"
"Jedi, Sith, Force, Potentium, all titles and names created by another," the Vergere look-alike said, ruffling her feathers. "Are you a Jedi because others call you one, or because you know you are one? As a living planet, I am in a classification of my own. I have no benefit of a teacher I can turn to when I get overwhelmed by what I can sense in the Force. I have to rely on conversations with different visitors who spout all sorts of titles and indoctrinated beliefs at me. Very few appear to be independent in thought. They were told one thing from birth and that was how they viewed the world around them. I have as many questions about the life energy you call the Force as you. I have resigned myself to never getting answers to many of them. Like me, the others are worried about you becoming a Sith, going dark, being seduced by the 'dark side' as I heard one say."
"I know," Anakin ran a hand through his hair. "But they shouldn't have to worry."
"If you are not a Jedi, and not a Sith, what are you?" the Vergere body-double said with a very Vergere tilt of her head.
"I'm Anakin."
"And as someone who sees the Force differently than the others, will you let them tell you that the sky is green when it is actually blue? That the water is orange instead of black?"
"You're the second person to tell me that the Force is only what I make of it," Anakin remarked.
"And the other?"

"Brisha Syo, my Sith teacher."
After a brief period of silence, Sekot spoke again. "I misspoke earlier, when I said that the belief of Potentium was flawed. It is not so much flawed as it is incomplete. As are the beliefs of the Jedi, the Sith, and every other doctrine I have heard. In every case, the views of those practitioners were said to be the only 'correct' view of the life energies of this galaxy. That all others had to be wrong, didn't go far enough, or was a 'corruption' of the truth. Compared to the vastness of the Force, what do they know? Rodents on the tampasi floor will look at a bora's roots and declare it one thing, while the birds nesting in its branches will call it another. Even humans and Ferroan, who see the bora's full form, see it differently than the insects that live beneath its bark. *I* perceive a bora much differently than all the others, and as powerful as I am, still cannot see it as they do. The Force may be one, and it may be what you make of it, but when you confine yourself to a single interpretation, you blind and deafen yourselves to others. How can you claim to know the Force, when I, a life form on a scale far greater than any I have encountered, do not even understand it myself? Why do you think I continue to ask questions to the Jedi, Ferroans, and other visitors? Perhaps, on the scale from which they view the Force, they are seeing something I am not. Your Brisha Syo, and your aunt and uncle, both have opposing views of the Force. As does your brother, as does Vergere. Create your own understanding of the Force and do not parrot others. Yet take into consideration the perceptions of others, and do not discard their theories outright. You have the potential to shape this galaxy for the better, or for the worse, Anakin Solo. Only time, and your own philosophies, will determine which."
([{Chapter End}])
A\N: Would it worry anyone if I said that things still get worse for Anakin? Yes? Well, fortunately, things don't =). Things start to stabilize over the next two story arcs and Anakin begins his fade from the public eye...with Jacen eventually taking his place. The attack on Mandalore begins this weekend, split up between two chapters. I thought of making you all wait until next Wednesday for its conclusion, but I figured that'd just be mean. So, you'll finish Force Heretic Book 3 this Sunday and begin with the interlude on Wednesday.
The Final Prophecy arc is almost wholly original story, kind of in the same vein as my Tatooine arc, and will take you all up to chapter 59. Expect the new Jedi of the NJO to play an ever increasing role as the survivors of Myrkr transform into mentors in many ways.
As always, review if you so desire.

ADA 50

Fifty
([{I}]) ([{I}])

It was only a couple weeks before the New Year. That is, if the inhabitants of Mandalore and its moons were alive at the end of those two weeks. All of Mandalore was on high alert, all the major city-centers evacuated. The Mandalorian Protectorate was fully deployed; assigned strategic underground and mountain fortress sites from which they would repulse any Yuuzhan Vong ground invasion. Aiding the Mandalorians in the defense of their home-world was a small taskforce of Galactic Alliance and Imperial Remnant cruisers. In addition to the ships, there were several dozen battalions of stormtroopers, Galactic Alliance marines, Freed Yuuzhan Vong warriors, and Lando's YVH-1 Vongbots entrenched with the Mandalorians in the planet's various strongholds.

"Landing in five, four, three, two, one." The *No Luck Required*, *Millennium Falcon,* and *Pulsar Skate* touched down in the open field just outside of the Kyrimorut. The three vessels were joining several Galactic Alliance science vessels, an Imperial shuttle, and a handful of Mandalorian vessels.

Only a week ago the field had been full of Mandalorians playing and competing in the competition Sannah and the others had organized. Now it was serving as a landing zone for the forces coming to reinforce the Kyrimorut. Lando's supply vessels had already dropped off shiploads worth of blaster packs, food, and everything one would need to survive a long-term siege.

"Airlock cycling," Uldir said, he glanced out the viewport and saw parts of the nine-hundred strong Mandalorian force that had been sent to reinforce the Kyrimorut. "Looks busy out there."

"They're all wearing armor," Tahiri said, slightly taken aback as she watched the Mandalorians go about making preparations. "The battle's not for another couple of days."

"You've never met Mandalorians before, have you?" Vook said snidely.

"Never had a reason to," Tahiri shook her head.

"This should be interesting," Leaft chuckled.

The airlock cycled and the landing ramp lowered. The crew of the *No Luck Required* joined the crews of the other Galactic Alliance vessels.

"Welcome to *Manda'yaim*," Sannah called out, waving brightly. "*Su'cuy* Tahiri! Valin. Sella. Glad you could all make it."

"Sannah?" Valin's jaw dropped at the sight of the Melodie. Jysella's eyes bulged. And Tahiri blinked dimly; barely able to recognize the

teen from the last mental image she had of her. The dark-skinned girl had her hair in a pixie-like cut and her lithe figure was accented well by her armored jumpsuit-Jedi robe mix. A purple-colored headband completed her outfit and brought out the yellow shades of her irises. She definitely wasn't the little girl they all remembered.
"Oh come on, I don't look *that* different," Sannah said, then she turned to her boyfriend. "Do I?"
"Nope," Doran shook his head and wrapped his arms around her in a loose hug. "Still the same Fish-Girl to me. They must be staring at the small army behind us."
"Right," Valin said sarcastically. "That's exactly what we were looking at."
"Doran?" Tahiri said, the morning light making the teenage Jedi's discolored skin and off-colored eyes more apparent.
Raising a hand self-consciously, he managed a small smirk. "Hey. I guess I tried to be too much like you and Anakin. Is there a club for Shaped Jedi that I can join?"
"Sure thing, kid," Klin-Fa spoke up. "It's great to see you up and about and not a cut up slab of meat on a med-table."
"Tact, Klin-Fa, tact," Uldir muttered, holding his head. "And you wonder why everyone has trouble liking you after first impressions."
"It's alright. I'll tell you the story later, Tahiri," Doran chuckled as Klin-Fa stuck her tongue out at Uldir. He gestured to the Mandalorians standing by Sannah and himself. "These two are our good friends, Jintar and Dinua. *Ner vode*, meet Tahiri Kwaad, Jedi Knight."
Both Mandalorians, wearing full armor, plus the helmet, just inclined their heads in greeting. Tahiri returned the gesture evenly. "I look forward to fighting alongside you and your fellow Mandalorians."
"The pleasure will be ours, *Jetii*," Dinua replied courteously.
Sannah whirled around and scowled at her Mandalorian friend. "It took me over a month and a half for you to treat me as something more than dirt. How come she gets a warm greeting right away?"
"It's a warrior thing," Jintar answered in Dinua's place. "Kindred souls and the like."
"Plus, she's not the one dating the *dikut* over there," Dinua added, jerking her thumb toward Doran.
Interrupting things was a startled yell of '*Vongese!*', and the sounds of half a dozen blasters being charged filled the air. With an absent wave of her hand, not even looking in the direction of the commotion, Tahiri yanked all the blasters away before any triggers could be pulled.
"She's with us."

"And *that's* why you need straps attached to your blaster rifles," Dinua turned to scold the Protectors who had just been disarmed.
Shaeri, who had just removed her hood, inclined her head politely at the dozens of regular Mandalorian soldiers—who were already in the process of wilting from a combined Jintar/Dinua lecture—and moved up to Tahiri's side. "Thank you. I forgot that not everyone is used to fighting alongside the Yuuzhan Vong just yet. Though I *am* beginning to think that raising one's blaster is a common form of greeting in this galaxy."
A small pulse of Force energy washed over them, and eyes abruptly traveled back to the source. Doran was staring at Shaeri, his face suddenly pale and his breathing ragged. Small bits of pebble and twigs began to rise into the air. Sannah was at his side in a heartbeat, wrapping her arms around him and glaring at the others, as if daring them to say something. After several seconds of simply manipulating their Force bond to soothe him, Doran buried his nose into Sannah's hair and inhaled deeply.
"Sorry," Doran rasped, sensing the others' concern, but still holding onto Sannah as if she was the only thing connecting him to reality.
"Nothing to be sorry for," Tahiri said empathetically. In a slightly subdued voice, she motioned to Shaeri. "This is Shaeri. She's been at my side since Myrkr and she's kind of become like a little sister to me. Shaeri, these are Doran and Sannah, my friends."
Shaeri took a very hesitant step forward to Doran, stopping when Sannah's yellow eyes flashed dangerously. It may have been an accident or a reflex action, honed by her months of training with Mandalorians, but Sannah's hand had landed on her lightsaber; making it clear that any further attempt to approach Doran wouldn't be pretty.
"It's alright, Fish-Girl," Doran managed. "I'm going to be fighting Yuuzhan Vong. Now's a good as time as any to face my fears. At least this one won't kill me while I'm in the middle of one of my panic attacks."
"Not funny," Sannah growled softly, but she took a cautious step to the side.
Doran swallowed and met Shaeri at a halfway point. "*Nikk pryozz Doran Sarkin Tainer. [It'll be an honor to work with one who is freed.]*"
Shaeri seemed surprise by his rough Yuuzhan Vong. "Shaped?"
Doran shook his head. "Self-taught, amazing what you can find on the HoloNet these days. I figured I might as well learn what those shapers were saying, seeing as I hear their voices in my nightmares almost every night. Besides, mom would have made me learn your language eventually anyways. How's the accent?"

"Understandable. There's a Domain Carr slant to it, though. They always stress their z's and k's a bit more than others," Shaeri said with a tilt of her head. "You do need a little work on the voweling. More guttural, don't stretch them out so much."
"I'll get right on it," Doran said with a weak smile.
Shaeri tilted her head politely. "It will be an honor to fight alongside you as well, Jedi Sarkin-Tainer."
Doran exhaled, and tensed, trying to work up the nerve to ask the next question. Eventually, though, he managed it. "If you're not busy later, can you help with my language lessons? I swear, this isn't some very bad pickup line. It's just, Shimrra's Vong already have enough reason to hate me. The last thing I want to do is give them another reason by insulting them in broken Yuuzhan Vong."
Shaeri glanced over her shoulder at Tahiri, who nodded. Shaeri looked back to Doran, then at the way Sannah was still standing protectively at his side. "Sure. Your mate can join as well, if she wants to."
"I'll be there," Sannah said, squeezing Doran's hand lightly.
With the introductions mostly over, the adult members of the various crews having already greeted their Mandalorian counterparts, a much more serious air descended on the clearing.
Tyria Sarkin Tainer stepped forward out of the Kyrimorut to deliver the latest updates on the situation. "Alright, listen up. The *Vongese* have just taken Gargon, and will be here in two days. Freed One agents within the fleet confirm that the fleet commander is Malik Carr. This is the man who was responsible for the first fall of Obroa-Skai and the Yuuzhan Vong alliance with the Hutts, but whose fleet was devastated at Fondor. Because of that disaster, his social standing dropped considerably, and he sees this as his chance to redeem himself. Expect him to be more than cautious in order to avoid further disgrace. These agents have also confirmed that the Kyrimorut is one of his primary targets and will only suffer light bombardment. He wants to capture all Jedi alive to further restore his name and respect. To do this, he intends to overwhelm this area with ground forces. Apart from the other strategically important areas of this planet, the Kyrimorut will no doubt see some of the fiercest fighting. To aid our defenses, I give the floor to Galactic Alliance Science Director Danni Quee."
The blond scientist stepped forward, motioning behind her as a cadre of fellow scientists brought forth several crate-filled hover-sleds. Each of the cases opened to reveal a variety of spherical or dart-shaped, devices. "One of the greatest defenses Yuuzhan Vong warriors have is their vonduun crab armor," Danni began. "Impervious to most blaster fire, even lightsaber blades, it makes taking down a warrior challenging

to most. Working with a team of Imperial scientist, we have created what we call Bafforr Grenades. We were able to isolate and synthesize the compound within the pollen of a bafforr tree that the vonduun crab is allergic too. Deathly allergic. As many of you may know, the vonduun armor forms a bond with its wearer. When exposed to the effects of baffor pollen, the vonduun crab will swell and die, also killing its wearer. The dispersal pods on these grenades release the synthesized baffor compound in a cloud with a maximum effective range of just over four meters. Unfortunately, we were only able to create an even thousand of these weapons. We've already dispersed eight hundred to other high-profile targets across the planet, such as Keldabe and Sundari, leaving two hundred here for the defense of the Kyrimorut."

A team of scientist floated the spherical devices, which looked a lot like modified thermal detonators, over to a contingent of Mandalorians. As the specialized grenades were brought to a secure area, Danni continued her briefing.

"With the help of Jedi Master Cilghal and Galactic Alliance bio-engineers, we were also able to develop an anti-venom for the Yuuzhan Vong amphistaff," Danni motioned to the darts. "Early in the war, casualty rates among ground forces were high because even a single bite from an amphistaff could kill within minutes of injection. These anti-venom darts will immediately counter the venom should any of you be bitten. On the off chance you end up not needing them, they can be fitted into your wrist launchers and will actually kill an amphistaff if shot into the creatures mouth or eyes. The bright side about these is that there is enough for everyone to receive three darts. A special thanks should be given to two of the members of my team, Zak and Tash Arranda, who were instrumental in gathering different types of amphistaffs from all over the galaxy to give us a wide enough sample to work with."

Danni inclined her head towards the two Alderaanean anthropologists before looking back towards the rest of her audience. In the meantime, the scientists began pushing forward several hover-sleds full of the anti-venom darts. "Remember, each of these darts only contain enough anti-venom for a single bite. If you get bitten a second time, you will need to use a second dart. A third bite, a third dart. A fourth time? You have rotten luck and you'll probably have more things to worry about than just those bites. Also, your body can't take a fourth dose of anti-venom. Injecting a fourth dose will probably provide you a quicker death than the actual amphistaff venom. Which, if you do get into that situation, will probably be a blessing."

The morbid humor caused a round of chuckling from the Mandalorians as they each collected their share of the anti-venom and slipped them into their utility belts.
"There are two more things in our arsenal." Danni said, as one last hover-sled was brought out of the science vessel parked next to the *Falcon*. "Yuuzhan Vong are known to use slaves as cannon fodder. These slaves are implanted with a slave-seed that binds with their central nervous system and can be controlled from afar to inflict great pain on them." She opened a large crate to reveal a set of human-sized blaster cannon-like devices. "Using black-market tech available to us via Hutt Space, we were able to come up with an energy frequency that will render the slave-seeds temporarily inert. These devices are still in their test phase, so we don't know about their effectiveness. But they are designed to fire a stun-burst like web of energy in a three meter spread that will temporarily render the slave-seed, and the person it's implanted in, inert. In theory, this should prevent the Yuuzhan Vong from killing the slaves and will give us a chance to rescue them by injecting them with a serum we've developed. We had thirty of these disruptor cannons made, and after delivering the others to the other locations on this planet, two will be available for this location. These can act as massive stun cannons in a pinch, but it is unknown just how well it will affect the Yuuzhan Vong. I'll leave the military minds to decide how to best deploy these weapons."
The cannons were rolled out of the crate, and several Mandalorians directed them to various locations.
"Lastly," Danni said. "We have several experimental anti-vehicle beam-cannons designed off of P'w'eck paddle-beam technology. As the Ssi-ruuk and P'w'eck have yet to actually engage Yuuzhan Vong in battle, we're unsure how effective their weaponry will be." Five crates, each packed with three shoulder-mounted, tube-like weapons, were unveiled. "Capable of taking out air and ground threats, the weapons have two firing stages. The first is a high concentration of continuous, very visible, yet non-lethal energy designed to deliberately provoke and overload the void defenses the Yuuzhan Vong employ. Following this first beam of energy several dozen milliseconds later, is a low-frequency beam of lethal energy, invisible to our naked eyes. If the weapons work, it will look as if the first beam had bypassed the defenses to score a lethal hit, and will help lower the morale of the enemy and sow confusion in their ranks. The power cores are based on Ssi-ruuk and P'w'eck tech and are self-renewing. After firing, they'll be ready for a second shot a full minute and a half later."
"The effective range?" One of the Mandalorians asked.

Danni grimaced. "Like I said, they're in their experimental phase. We know they'll bypass void defenses, what we don't know is how effective they'll be in actual battle situations. Play it safe, however, and fire only when you're absolutely sure of a kill."
Like children receiving gifts, despite the experimental nature of the weapon, the Mandalorians seemed to overall be eager to test the new weapon.
"Jedi Sarkin Tainer," Danni ceded the floor back to the other Jedi.
Tyria stepped back up. "The basic plan is that we're going to let *Manda'yaim*, that's Mandalore to those who don't speak the lingo, get pounded pretty hard, and then hit the *Vongese* back twice as hard. We don't have the ships to win a space battle, and we know full well that we'll lose a lot of civilians in this fight. When the Yuuzhan Vong start landing ground troopers, however, the joint Imperial-Galactic Alliance taskforce will jump in system to harass the fleet in orbit. They won't jump all at once, but in threes and fours, at different angles. We're counting on Malik Carr's paranoia of being suckered into another trap to work against him. Hopefully we can spook him enough that he turns tail and leaves his ground troops behind. There is a Plan B. If Malik doesn't run, the Freed Ones in his fleet assure me that they can take commando units into the command cruisers, and we can take the rest of the fleet out that way. Either way, we're all here to make sure of one thing, that the Yuuzhan Vong do not take this planet. Clan leaders, you have your assignments. *Ori'ramikade* Dinua Jeban and Jintar Skirata will help coordinate any last minute adjustments to our defenses. A second team of *Ori'ramikade* will arrive later today to augment our defenses. In the event this position is overwhelmed, we will fall back to nearby network of mountain caves and let the Yuuzhan Vong chase us to their doom. Everyone report to your assigned locations, then make sure you spend time with your clans and get a good night's sleep. In two days' time, the battle for Mandalore will begin."
([{II}]) ([{II}])
It was a day full of ups and downs for Doran Sarkin-Tainer. Waking up and knowing that you were in for the fight of your life the next day, a fight you and your friends might possibly die in, was not a very good way to start the day. Waking up and finding your girlfriend curled up against your side, made it slightly better. Waking up and turning your head to find you had a small audience, kind of took that slightly better feeling away and left him where he had begun—highly aware of his possible imminent death, and shirtless in front of his two Mandalorian friends. For some reason, those two situations didn't really go well together.

"Hey," Jintar said with an abortive wave. "Sorry to do this, but my dad and my uncles want to speak with you and Sannah while they have the time."
"And this couldn't wait until later?" Sannah grumbled against Doran's chest, having awoken when he did.
"Well, it was either me and Dinua waking the two of you up, or my uncles coming in here," Jintar said.
"Do you know what they want?" Doran blinked.
Jintar nodded. "Yup, but I don't want to spoil it for you, or them."
"Come on, Fish-Girl. The crazy old Mandalorians want to tell us something," Doran nudged her figure.
Sannah just buried her face against his chest and muttered, "Crazy old Mandalorians need to give currently very comfy, young, Melodie uninterrupted time with her boyfriend in nice warm bed."
"They'll do that later," Dinua chimed in. "But they really do have a full schedule today. They're finishing setting up the supply caches, ensuring the escape tunnels that lead to the mountains are stable, and mixing the other *Or'ramikade* that came in late yesterday with the regular Protector units."
"Alright, alright," Sannah sighed, casting a pouting glare at Jintar. "Why is it that I alternate between loving your uncles and wanting to throttle them on a daily basis?"
"They have that effect," Jintar laughed. "Come on. I think the two of you will like the surprise."
Once they were ready, the two teenage Jedi followed Jintar and Dinua back to the dining commons. There, the gathered members of the Clone War survivors were waiting for them with broad smiles. Off to the side, Tyria, Tahiri, Han, Leia, and the rest of the Galactic Alliance group, looked on in both amazement and confusion.
"Nice morning we're having, aren't we?" Kom'rk said, has hands resting on the torso piece of a set of multi-colored Mandalorian armor.
"Kom'rk?" Doran raised an eyebrow.
"Doran," Kom'rk replied, not revealing anything. A glance at the others didn't reveal anything either. But then the older Mandalorians parted and the Clan Skirata patriarch, Kal Skirata, stepped forward; supported by his cane and Ordo Skirata.
"All of us have heard the story of how you sacrificed yourself for the *Or'ramikade*," the aged Kal Skirata said in a raspy voice, leaning heavily on his cane. "As someone familiar with our ways, you are no doubt aware that every Mandalorian worthy of holding that name is a brother or sister to us. It only makes sense then, that your sacrifice not go unacknowledged. Ordo."

As Kal closed his eyes and seemed to need several deep breaths after his short speech, Ordo dutifully took over. "After a clan meeting, and with confirmation from *Mand'alor*, we have agreed that your actions are equal to that of any *Mando'ad.* We present to you this *beskar'gam* and give you the right to refer to any *Mando'ade* as your brother or sister."

"The armor has been adjusted to match the fluid Jedi fighting styles," former Jedi Knight, Bardan Jussik, said in explanation. "Though it will not provide as much protection as a standard set of armor, it is a symbol of *Manda'yaim.* Wear it proudly and do not disgrace it."

A stunned Doran could only nod.

"We are not done yet," Ordo said, when others began to clap and cheer for Doran. Ordo turned his gaze onto Sannah. "Sannah of the Melodie, it is beyond rare for an outsider, especially a Jedi, to receive the approval of not just a majority of the *Or'ramikade*, but of *Mand'alor* himself. For reuniting the *Kyr'tsad* and *Or'ramikade*, and for your continued support of *Manda'yaim*, you, like Doran, have been also granted the status of honorary Mandalorian."

Niner stepped forward carrying a second set of multi-colored armor and holding it out for Sannah to take. The Melodie teen's eyes were round as her jaw dropped. Niner inclined his head politely. "We are well aware of your eventual metamorphosis and have designed this armor with that in mind. The armor is waterproof, and the sleeves and lower portions of the armor can be modified for when you, as Doran says, go 'all fish-y.'"

Sannah could only blink dumbly as she accepted the suit of armor. "Thank you." She finally managed to swallow.

"Thank you very much," Doran agreed fervently, experimentally lifting the torso segment of his own armor.

"Try it on," Jintar grinned.

The older Mandalorians just chuckled softly and dispersed to their tasks, while the Galactic Alliance group crowded in to admire the sets of armor and cheer the two teens on.

"You're definitely going to have to tell me about your adventures," Tahiri laughed, hugging a still stunned Sannah as the others clapped Doran on his back in congratulations.

"Boy do we have some stories to tell you," Sannah grinned at Tahiri.

Jintar brought out several large platters of uj cake from the cooler, and a small, spontaneous party, full of good cheer, broke out. Other Mandalorians, regular Protectors and *Ori'ramikade* alike, would occasionally drop in mostly to take part in the uj cake, but also to

share their congratulations with Doran and Sannah. When the cake was gone, everyone reluctantly dispersed back to their duties.
And that was one of the 'up' parts of Doran's day. The 'down' portion of his day came shortly after, when it was time for his scheduled 'language' lessons with Shaeri. Normally learning a new language would be fun for Doran. But past languages didn't trigger a panic attack or make him break out in a cold sweat. Fortunately, the language lessons were outside the Kyrimorut, away from anyone who might take note of his moment of weakness.
"If you would be more comfortable, I am sure Tahiri can teach you the language just as well," Shaeri said softly, noting the teenage Jedi's agitated state.
"No, I have to do this," Doran breathed, trying to control his shaking hands. It wasn't just Shaeri's Yuuzhan Vong appearance that was bothering him, but her absence in the Force.
"We can do it at a later time," Sannah said gently.
"The Yuuzhan Vong are attacking tomorrow," Doran shook his head. "If I'm going to get over this, or at least get a handle on this, it has to be today."
Shaeri, being the youngest of the three, wrung her hands unconsciously. "If you wish to confront it head on, perhaps…perhaps we can start on your capture. Earlier you mentioned that you started to learn the language of my people because of the voices you hear in your nightmares. Is there any particular phrase that stands out?"
Doran, still looking a little pale, nodded. "Yeah. The head shaper said it a lot, and I think I got the meaning after they peeled away my skin every time he said it." Doran repeated the phrase and smiled weakly. "It means something along the lines of use those scrape-y bugs to carve him up, doesn't it?"
Shaeri looked down at the ground. "The first part, yes."
"And the second part?" Doran said with a raised eyebrow.
Shaeri glanced at Sannah, who was looking more than a little sick, then at Doran apologetically. "The shaper was expressing his enjoyment at the fact that they could make you beg for mercy so quickly."
"Sick bastard," Doran sighed, leaning back on his hands and letting the cool air wash over him. "I always thought he was enjoying things a bit too much."
"I am sorry."
"What for?" Doran glanced over to her. "You didn't do anything wrong."
"They are still my people," Shaeri replied with a shrug. "As misguided as they are, they truly think that what they're doing is creating a better

future for all Yuuzhan Vong. They just don't seem to care that they are ruining the lives of so many in their quest for a home."
"What changed *your* mind?" Doran asked.
"It was more of a…how would you people say it? A spur of the moment type of thing," Shaeri smiled fondly. "Well that, and the ship I was originally on was getting shot to pieces by the divine forces of Yun-Yammka, and I would have died had I stayed onboard."
"Death, a good motivator," Doran agreed, recalling how it had been his desire for death that had enabled him to successfully enter a *moricho* trance.
"Indeed. I was scared out of my mind at first. I mean, the first Jedi I met was that Rhysode man and the Wookie. Here I was, climbing onto their stolen ship, and he suddenly steps forward with his light sword pointed at my face. Behind me, his Wookie friend steps out and places his blade by my neck. Ganner's a big man with a scary scar on his face, and the Wookie was even bigger. I was just tiny little me, trying to not blow up with the rest of the Yun-Harla sect. At the time, I had no knowledge of your language. So when he started yelling at me in your tongue…well…I was really terrified that I had made the wrong choice and that my goddess was going to punish me for attempting to defect. When I got down on my knees and starting praying to her, I think Ganner mistook my worship of her for my worship of him and decided to spare me. Afterwards though, all the Jedi were nice to me and it just seemed like a better place to be than on the whip end of some slave overseer on a distant, alien planet. I haven't regretted a moment since then."
"What about your family? Errr…Domain?" Sannah asked curiously. "You had to leave them behind, didn't you?"
"My mother and father were also Shamed," Shaeri said, idly stacking small piles of pebbles together. "They died when I was young. I have only faint memories of them. All I know is that my father was a priest of Yun-Harla, and my mother was a Shamed One he had had an illicit relationship with. The others found out and he was stripped of his title and made Shamed. He loved my mother though and stayed with her, I remember that much. As for my Domain, I am Shaeri Jamaane, of Domain Jamaane."
Doran's eyebrows shot up. "Jamaane? As in the Supreme Overlord Shimrra Jamaane?"
"It is why I feel compelled to apologize for the actions of my people," Shaeri nodded with a sad smile. "If it were not for the actions of my Domain, this galaxy would not have had the many deaths it has

suffered. If it were not for the actions of my Domain, *you* wouldn't have suffered at the hands of the shapers."
"I'm sure I'll get over it eventually," Doran said with a shrug. "I mean, look at me now. I'm not running away from you. In fact, I'm having a very pleasant conversation."
"We could try to communicate in Yuuzhan Vong," Shaeri said uncertainly. "That is, if you're ready."
Doran smiled at her. "I'm ready, I guess. I mean, I kind of understand the language better than I can speak it at the moment. I got the basic grammar down. I just have a problem saying the stuff that comes up in my head."
"Let's start with your nightmares. Is there anything else in your nightmares that you wish me to translate?"
And the lessons went on. Despite it being a low moment in the day, the lessons ended on a positive note. Strangely enough, once he was able to understand the phrases in his nightmares, they didn't seem as scary. What had once been mysterious alien grumblings followed by lots of pain was reduced to menial things such as 'go get me this sort of tool' or 'watch what happens when I do this to him,' followed by the actions of sadistic bullies. By clinically dissecting the words spoken by the shapers, Doran realized that the memories didn't hurt as much as he expected them too. As a bonus, he even got to learn a little about Shaping and was able to better understand just exactly what the shapers had been doing to him.
Even then, he left the lesson feeling a little shaky and more than a little vulnerable. Fortunately, his super-girlfriend was at his side sending death glares at anyone who remarked at how their 'newest Mandalorian brother' appeared weak, or his inclusion into their ranks was a mistake.
Most of the comments stopped completely after his equally super, not-quite-girlfriend-more-than-best-friend, and her own boyfriend, heard several male Protectors makes some snide comment about him, and kindly proceeded to show them the error of their ways. Kindly, because of the upcoming battle and the need for every available solider. Needless to say, after the threat of castration in their sleep, the offenders refrained from making any more wisecracks. The success of the threat was magnified by the fact that every single *Ori'ramikade* present, nearly three dozen, in addition to all of Clan Skirata, had promised to help Jintar and Dinua in their endeavor.
It was a little embarrassing for Doran, but he still smiled sheepishly and nodded gratefully at any of the *Ori'ramikade* and Skirata clan members he passed. The rest of the day was spent helping out the

various members of Clan Skirata with their tasks. Whether it was levitating boulders to help create a mountain safe-house, to helping to hollow out 'holding chambers'—massive underground chambers designed solely to bottleneck and annihilate any attacking enemy force—both he and Sannah were kept busy until the evening meal.
Before Doran knew it, the day was over, the evening meal was done, and he was already getting ready to retire for the night. For once, he wasn't as afraid of the nightmarish visions and memories.
Nevertheless, he didn't complain or protest when Sannah followed him to his bunk and tucked herself against his side. He wasn't afraid, but a little support never hurt anyone.
"Hey, Fish-Girl?" He murmured.
"Hmm?"
"Will you be alright with tomorrow? You know, with your no-killing thing."
"No-killing *sentient* beings," Sannah corrected softly. "And I'll still stick to that. A lightsaber can block and protect just as much as it can slash and kill. I'll be covering the teams of medics. How about you? Will *you* be okay?"
Doran stared up at the bare ceiling. "I guess I have to be, right? The battle's coming whether I'm okay with it or not."
"Doran?"
"I'll be…fine, Sannah," Doran said, struggling to find the words. "I mean, the talk with Shaeri really helped. I guess the only thing that's left will be to see if it helped enough."
"Yeah," Sannah sighed, nuzzling him lightly, causing his arm to tighten around her.
A comfortable silence filled the air for several seconds, then Doran spoke again. "Whatever happens in the coming days, just stay alive, Fish-Girl, 'kay?"
"You too, Adventure Boy," Sannah whispered, their fear of what was to come openly shared between the two of them. Each tried to comfort the other, taking solace in their moment together and the knowledge that they would face whatever was coming side-by-side.
Wrapping his arms around her and kissing the top of Sannah's head, Doran closed his eyes and tried to relax for the coming battle.
([{III}]) ([{III}])
A messenger sprinted down the hallways, bursting into the command center of the Kyrimorut breathlessly. The chatter in the room stopped, and all eyes turned to the messenger. Taking in great gulps of air, he breathed the words they had been waiting for.
"They're here!"

The commander center was an immediate flurry of motion. Kal Skirata and Ordo Skirata worked together with Dinua to ascertain the readiness of their units. Scout and Kina Ha both left the room to check on the medicinal supplies and make sure the emergency rooms were ready to take on wounded. All the while, reports began to flow in.
"Sundari confirms, Mandallian was just razed. Yuuzhan Vong forces arriving in T-minus ten minutes."
"*Gladiator* droid force in position."
"Sensor buoys report large Yuuzhan Vong force, over thirty capital ships, leaving Mandallian's gravity shadow."
"So much for trimming down their attack force with a pre-emptive strike," Dinua muttered.
"Imagine what would have happened if they *still* had those forces at their disposal," Tyria replied, watching the sensor grids mark the progress of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet.
"Do we have eyes on the vessels?" Tahiri spoke up. "Shaeri, Danni, and myself might be able to recognize which Domains are participating. We can adjust our strategies accordingly."
"Do we have eyes?" Another Mandalorian looked up.
"We have transmissions from the Mandallian satellites shortly before they were destroyed," another nodded. "Putting it on the tertiary holo-panel now."
The dark outlines of the living ships appeared in holographic form, moving ever closer to the camera. There was ample time to view the massive fleet, as well as the fighters peeling away from the motherships. A flight of coralskippers veered away and then proceeded to use the satellite for target practice.
"The formation the coralskippers were in, it's Domain Lian," Shaeri said abruptly. "They are in a situation similar to Domain Carr, desperate to reclaim honor for their Domain. I would not be surprised if they immolated themselves against your planet's defenses."
"We have another angle."
After studying the new footage, Tahiri pointed to a Matalok. "Domain Yaght. They're also hurting status-wise. They're the ones who are partially responsible for the successful Jedi infiltration at Myrkr."
"So you mean to tell me that the *Vongese* are throwing all their nothing-to-lose people at us?" Meerel Skirata grumbled.
"Seems like it," Danni concurred. "Since I work with shapers on an almost daily basis, I recognize the markings on some of the vessels as belonging to Domain Molou. They got blacklisted after some type of heretical experiment on Rodia. Expect something unorthodox."

The minutes went by at a glacial speed, the din of constant reports fading as the gravity of the situation caused everyone to fall into silence. The only thing those in the Kyrimorut could do was wait as the Yuuzhan Vong fleet came within range of Mandalore's sensors. The fleets slowed, but only to eliminate the massive minefield the Mandalorians had left around their planet. Watching the alien fleet clear out the thousands of mines in a matter of minutes was slightly intimidating. The yellow flashes of plasma, coupled with the detonation of handfuls of mines at a time, filled the screens for several long minutes. And then the fleet was on the move again. The droid-controlled *Gladiator*-class fighters streamed up from the planet, weapons blazing.

The Yuuzhan Vong blew them away one at a time, suffering only cosmetic damage in the process. And then the orbital sensors above the planet were shot down, and the screens went dark.

Seconds ticked by. Everyone tense as they imagined the massive fleet moving into position all around the planet. It would take several minutes to position such a large armada. And with every minute that passed, they could just envision the might of the alien invaders being brought to bear.

One final report came in.

The enemy was in position to begin orbital bombardment.

Breaths were short and ragged, all eyes directed to the ceiling.

All the sudden a massive explosion erupted on the surface with a muted boom, sending a shudder through the underground dwelling. Another explosion. And then another. The attack beginning in earnest. The hollow thuds of the plasma projectiles hitting the ground vibrating through the Kyrimorut like the ominous sounds of a giant fist hammering on a door. The beat was incessant, its destructive power unquestionable as parts of the ceiling of the Kyrimorut gave in to the relentless barrage.

As bad as the members of the Kyrimorut were taking it, the destruction was far worse elsewhere on the planet. Entire cities, though mostly vacant due to the advance warning, were leveled within the first few barrages. The country-side was torn up from the plasma blasts of the heavy cruisers. Refugee camps decimated by strafing runs of the coralskippers. The ground was turning into glass in some areas as the intense bombardment seemed to go on indefinitely. Great chunks of land were blasted into the air. Forests set aflame. All the while, coralskippers and blastboulders fired at anything over a couple meters tall. The planet was being churned up and melted into slag by the orbital bombardment, no area was safe. From the desert cities, to the

mountain villages, mass infernos were whipped up and ravaging the surface.
Over the Kyrimorut, the bombardment was over, the rumblings stopped.
Those in the Kyrimorut's command center picked themselves off of the ground, brushing off the dirt and debris that had come down from the partially collapsed ceiling.
"Anyone need a medic?" One Mandalorian called out.
No one took him up on the offer.
"All right everyone," the patriarch of Clan Skirata, Kal Skirata announced. "To your stations. You are all *Mando'ade*. Do your duty. Do as you were born to do. Fight and return victorious."
There was a cheer from the mostly Mandalorian audience, and the soldiers streamed out of the Kyrimorut. They emerged to find themselves in a land very different than they were used to. The once lush and vibrant forest had been reduced to ash and burnt-out tree trunks. The grassy fields completely blackened and pockmarked with craters. For several kilometers, no square centimeter of land around the Kyrimorut was a color other than black. The Mandalorians promptly turned the craters into foxholes, bringing with them ammunition and blasters. Fallen, burnt out trees were dragged into positions for a makeshift barricade. While others rolled larger rocks from the nearby cliff-side over to the Kyrimorut for additional cover.
And then all was quite once more.
More seconds ticked by. The whine of approaching Yuuzhan Vong vessels, barely audible at first, grew in strength with every passing moment. The Mandalorians looked up and saw a literal armada of landing craft descending all around them, the hulls glowing a hellish red and orange as they entered the atmosphere. Their numbers cut through the black smoke curling up in the sky, casting a great shadow all around the land.
From somewhere in the battlefield a syllabic chant, coupled with the rapid, rhythmic beating of armored chest plates, began; rising above the buzzing hum of hundreds of landing craft in a primal challenge.
"*Tang...Sa...Rang...Broka!*"
The chant was picked up by an opposite side of the scorched battlefield, even as swirls of dust began to sweep into the air from the downdraft of the dozen of approaching dropships.
"*Man...do...ade...Ka'rta*"
Others joined in, their voices intensifying the chant.
"*Dha...We...rda...Ve...rda...A...den-Tratu.*"

Sannah and Doran exchanged one last kiss before donning the helmets of their custom-built Mandalorian armor and checking their weapons.
"*Man-da-yaim kan-do-sii adu. Dum mo-tir ca-tra na-u tracinya."* The Mandalorians continued in defiance of the impossible odds, their voices growing louder and faster as more and more joined in. Some of the Mandalorians who had yet to put on their helmets pulled out wooden flutes and began to play along with the chants and rhythmic beating. Soon the entire clearing was a battle between the hundreds of chanting Mandalorians and the buzzing hum of hundreds of dovin basal engines.
"*Gra-tua cu-un hett su dralysh'a."*
"Hey Dinua," Jintar said lightly, between the rhythmic beating of his armor. "After this, feel like getting married?"
Dinua shrugged. "Sounds good, but we still have to make it through this battle."
"Only a couple thousand *Vongese* between us and a married life then," Jintar remarked.
"You really got a feel sorry for them," Dinua grinned behind her helmet as she charged her blaster.
"Wait a minute. Did you two just agree to get married?" Sannah said incredulously.
Dinua and Jintar looked at each other, then back at the Melodie. "Yup."
"You Mandos really are out of your mind," Sannah chuckled weakly as the chant continued in the background.
"*K-om'rk…ts-ad droten…troch nyn ures adenn!"*
Tahiri, using the battlemeld, exchange a grim mental nod with Zekk, Lowie, and Tesar, as she let her amphistaff drop into one hand, and her lightsaber fly into her other. Next to her, Klin-Fa let out a hissing breath, her eyes tracking the landing crafts unblinkingly.
"I can actually sense them," Klin-Fa muttered, a white-knuckled grip around her lightsaber betraying her silent rage. "I can really feel those scarheads in the Force."
"Hard not to sense them," Tahiri muttered, several dark shadows passing overhead. "Soon we'll be chest-deep in them."
"Let them come," Klin-Fa hissed.
"Dha We-rda Ve-rda a'den tratu. Man-da-yaim kan-do-sii adu!"
"Don't really have a choice in that matter," Tahiri replied, her sweat-slickened hands clammy against the cool metal of her lightsaber.
"Dum mo-tir ca-tra na-u tracinya."
"*Gra-tua cu-un hett su dralysh'a. Taung!"*
The chanting and rhythmic beating stopped, and an eerie silence settled over the battlefield.

The Yuuzhan Vong landing crafts had completed their reentry and now ringed the Kyrimorut in several complete, concentric circles. There they sat. Rows and rows of landing craft just hovering in the air. There were so many they nearly blotted out the morning sun. It was a surreal moment, with the massive army just sitting in the skies above them. The remaining Mandalorians all donned their helmets and readied their weapons.

And then some sort of signal was given, and the real battle begun. The ships surged back to life all at once, swooping forward and touching down in any open place they could.

One of the bolder landing crafts had the audacity to try and land directly at the Kyrimorut's doorstop.

Mereel Skirata stepped up, one of Danni's beam-cannons mounted on his shoulder. He leveled the weapon, and then fired. The blindingly-bright beam of energy was immediately swallowed by the landing craft's void defenses. But the moment the voids disappeared, the entire craft was engulfed in a massive fireball. The rest of the Mandalorians readied their weapons, while the Jedi used their abilities to keep a bird's eye view of the battlefield.

"The weapon works," Mereel announced, as the pieces of the ship rained down all around him. "This is it! *Vode an*!"

The other landing craft promptly veered away, even as the fourteen other beam cannons flared up from all around the Kyrimorut. A good dozen more landing craft came crashing down to the planet in flames. But those numbers were hardly anything compared to many dozens of other landing crafts touching down. One by one, they made it to the surface of the planet; their hues of natural oranges and purples standing out against the scorched earth. There they unloaded their cargo and darted back for the skies, and another dropship would take their place. The cycle repeated a seemingly endless number of times, the troops being offloaded all making a beeline for the Mandalorian position.

The blackened ground reverberated from the thousands of feet scampering across it. At first the Mandalorians had no idea what they were facing, but they were soon enlightened.

A horde of four-legged, bladed-armed, reptilian-like creatures, moving extremely fast, skittered out across the uneven surface of the ground. There were thousands of these creatures pouring out from all around, swarming at frightening speeds.

"What the shab are those things!" One of the Mandalorian snipers yelled, firing as he did.

"It doesn't matter, bring them down," Ordo Skirata barked.

"I don't believe it!" Danni said, staring at the approaching horde with wide eyes. "Those are *Vagh Rodiek*! The other shapers said they were just a myth!"
A sniper blast blew through the head of one of them. Fi glanced back at Danni. "Nope, definitely not a myth. They still die though, so that's good."
"For those who don't speak the Yuuzhan Vong language? I'll repeat the previous question, what the shab are those things?" Darman Skirata shouted over the din, his custom-made bowcaster bolt splashing against one of the creature's armored plating.
"*Vagh Rodiek!*" Danni tried to bring another down with blaster fire, but like the one Darman shot, its natural armored plating negated most of the damage. Only another headshot by Fi downed it. "They're what's left of the Rodians after Rodia fell to the Yuuzhan Vong."
"You're joking, right?" Zekk, who was helping the Mandalorians direct their soldiers to different hot-spots, looked at Danni in alarm.
"I wish I was," Danni shook her head. "Those things are Shaped Rodians."
"Poor little buggers," Fi shook his head, and blasted apart another. "I guess I'm doing them a favor by putting them out of their misery then."
A wave of lasers, plasma projectiles, sonic weapons, and shattergun blasts flared out from the defensive lines all around the Kyrimorut. The Shaped Rodians, however, were more than agile, easily skirting around the deadly projectiles as they charged the Mandalorian lines without any regard to their own health. Though they could take a pounding, they weren't invincible. A small pile of bodies was forming all around the Kyrimorut's perimeter as the creatures died one by one. But the fleet-footed creatures were not deterred at all.
More of the greenish-brown, bladed reptiles came, climbing over the bodies of the deceased without any care for their own health. As they grew nearer, many of them lowered their heads, and the air was suddenly full of several hundred, half a meter-long, razor-sharp quills slicing through the air. The Mandalorians at the front of the line didn't stand a chance as the quills punched through their visors or durasteel armor plates, impaling the warriors where they stood. At several points in the Mandalorian lines, the creatures dove into the foxholes, their bony scythe-like arms slashing mercilessly at the armored warriors within. The lines began to bend from the pressure of the mindless onslaught, the ground still vibrating beneath their feet.
The Jedi promptly raced across the battlefield, engaging these reptilian monstrosities with fierce flashes of their lightsabers.

"We really need to stop diving head first into life-or-death situations," Zekk shouted over the din, his lightsaber hissing as it cleaved through the chest of one of the shaped Rodians. "It's not healthy."
Tesar let out a hissing laugh as he dis-armed the bladed limbs of another shaped Rodian. "For them or uz, Zekk?"
"Us!" Zekk jerked his body back to avoid being scissored apart, then drove his saber into the chest of his attacker.
"[I feel sorrier for them]," Lowbacca growled, bashing in the head of another reptilian attacker. "[They no longer have any say as to their own lives. They slavishly attack us because they know nothing else other than the orders of the Vong they serve]."
"Now is *not* the time to make me feel sorry for them," Valin Horn said, flipping over another *Vagh Rodiek*, and then using the Force to trick it into impaling itself on his lightsaber.
"Oh look, they've deployed magma-spitters," Tahiri called out, pointing to the lumbering creatures waddling out of the next wave of dropships.
"Tahiri!"
"It's not my fault!" Tahiri retorted, even as the opening salvo exploded all around them.
"Thiz one had enough of magma-spitters and impossible oddz on Myrkr," Tesar groaned, picking himself off the ground, and then quickly using the Force to send several of the Shaped Rodians flying away from him.
A wave of blaster fire blazed by them and cut down the approaching horde of charging reptilians. The noise on the battlefield deafening as screams, yells, and blaster shrieks cut through the smoke-choked air.
"At least we have more help this time," Tahiri remarked as the Mandalorians they were protecting finally recovered and began a counter-attack.
Still, more creatures continued to pour in from all directions, overwhelming the lines in other points. The magma-spitters pounded the area with relentless barrages of molten rock, apathetic to the position of the charging *Vagh Rodiek*. Mandalorians were thrown into the air left and right by the multitude of blasts. Some were pounced upon as the brownish-green reptiles burst through the clouds of smoke and dust.
Dinua was hit hard with one of their bony arms and fell onto her back. She rolled to the side to avoid a downward stab, then drew her sidearm and fired. The yellow blast of plasma flared against the creature's armor, blackening it but doing little else. She rolled again as the creature chittered after her. Unhooking a plasma grenade from her belt, she lobbed it so that it bounced directly under the creature, then

crawled backwards as the greenish-brown reptile was annihilated in a glowing ball of fire.
A nearby Mandalorian wasn't so lucky, as his arms were sliced away, quickly followed by his helmeted head. Jintar leaped onto the back of the attacker, stuck his blaster rifle directly between its quills, and fired. The point-blank attack seemed to do the trick, and the creature toppled forward, dead.
But the Shaped Rodians were all over the place, falling and being replaced by dozens more. Explosions. Blaster fire. The air thick with smoke and the smell of charred flesh. Several of the beam cannons fired again, this time mowing through great swaths of the alien force like any anti-vehicle weapon would do to infantry.
Still the *Vagh Rodiek* came.
"What did they do, transplant all of Rodia here?" Fi shouted incredulously.
Mandalorians were falling by the dozens. The sheer numbers of the Shaped Rodians making up for their general lack of intellect and strategy. Even then, however, the *Vagh Rodiek* weren't so innumerous that they could continue the attack with the losses they sustained. They kept up their suicidal charge, but the tide was slowly turning. Just when it seemed as if the waves of Shaped Rodians would never end, the frontlines began to fall silent.
One by one the Mandalorians polished off the last of their attackers and then hurried to a different part of the battlefield to repel one final push.
And then, after several grueling minutes, the last of the greenish berserkers fell to the ground, twitching under the repeated barrage of a rotary cannon wielded by a group of Mandalorians led by Corr Skirata. Several more beam cannon blasts lanced out towards the magma-spitters and temporarily halted the barrage of molten artillery. Despite the relative silence that descended, however, the battle was far from over. In the time it had taken for the Mandalorians to handle the reptilian attackers, the other landing craft had dispersed their troopers, who were now approaching the Kyrimorut from all sides. And these weren't just any soldiers.
"*Rakamat* and their Chazrach slave soldiers," a bloodied Shaeri hissed, placing a Yuuzhan Vong bandage over the fresh cut on her thigh. A distant roar seemed to shake the skies as hulking shadows rose up above the layers of smoke. "Fire Breathers too."
An entire herd of the living Yuuzhan Vong siege beasts began to close in, their plasma cannons opening up within seconds. They lumbered forwards in the shadows of the towering Fire Breathers that

accompanied them. The magma-spitters likewise recovered, and the barrage intensified three-fold. Artillery blasts with mixed with plasma projectiles and gouts of flaming gas, sweeping across the outer edges of the battlefield with lethal results.
"Back to the tunnels!" Ordo yelled over the shrieking explosions.
Three beams from the beam cannons converged on one of the *rakamat*s. The creatures own defenses, a lot sturdier than the landing craft it had come from, actual held for a couple of seconds. But the combined energy output of the three cannons was too much, and the low-frequency blast ripped out great bloody chunks from it. Nevertheless, it continued to advance, needing a second volley from another team to bring it down completely.
The *rakamat*s continued to plod forward under the cover of the artillery blasts, the reptilian slave army of the Yuuzhan Vong, the Chazrach, hiding in the shadows of the massive creatures.
A Fire Breather advanced close enough to the Mandalorian lines to bathe an entire area with its superheated gases, igniting several unfortunate Mandalorians and burning others out of their foxholes. It shrugged off a couple of missile hits before another beam cannon lanced into its stomach and detonated the mixture of volatile gases within.
In the meantime, the Mandalorians continued to pull back, some carrying their wounded, even as the battlefield exploded all around them.
"Jedi! Get your *shebse* back here!" Darman Skirata roared over the sounds of several explosions. The Jedi teens had stayed behind to cover the retreat of the last of the Mandalorians and were in danger of being cut off by another wave of those strange four-legged reptilians that had been a part of the opening attack.
Plasma and magma continued to rain down all around them, while Yuuzhan Vong landing craft continued to descend.
Doran, seeing a group of dozen Mandalorians separated from the rest of the group and behind enemy lines, cursed. "Sannah! Tahiri!"
"We've got your back," Tahiri yelled back. "Go!"
Doran took off. He could hear the heavy footsteps of Sannah and Tahiri sprinting after him. Un-holstering the blaster the Mandalorians had given him, he laid down a sheet of covering fire. Sannah used her Mandalorian armor's own wrist-launcher to fire off an explosive missile at the feet of the approaching *rakamat*. The blast created a large divot in the ground, which the massive creature's foot snagged. The *rakamat*, pitched forward as its ankle snapped, throwing off the Chazrach riders and providing a temporary break in the fire.

"Go!" Doran yelled at the clustered Mandalorians. The group piled out of their foxholes and began to run along with the Jedi, the enemy fire intensifying all around them.
A deafening volley of blaster fire flew by their heads and shoulders as the guns of Niner, his daughter Etain, Fi Skirata and two of his children, and Mereel, and Corr, ensured that both the Jedi and trapped Mandalorians had enough cover to get back. The bright flash of the beam cannons pierced through the air above them as the others concentrated their fire on the other massive siege beasts closing in. Two more *rakamat* dropped to the ground.
But the Yuuzhan Vong forces continued to close in. A plasma explosion ripped through the ground where the beam cannon-carrying Mandalorians had been, followed by a devastating barrage of magma. Most were blasted back into the Kyrimorut, their fate unknown as the explosion caused the entrance to collapse in on itself. A few others had managed to dive out of the way, but were caught in the shockwave and sent flying through the air. A second volley of explosions landed just as Doran, Sannah, Tahiri, and the others were passing by Niner and the first group of Mandalorians. Bodies were vaporized in a heartbeat, people were thrown left and right like rag dolls, and the entire ground shuddered from the blast.
Heart thudding loudly in his ears, Doran managed to pull off his damaged helmet. Trickles of blood were dripping from his ears and nose, with deep cuts marking his face. He looked around in a daze, seeing body parts and corpses everywhere. Everything seemed to be going in slow motion as he gasped loudly for air, his ruptured eardrums throwing off his sense of balance. Another nearby explosion peppered his face with charred rock and dirt, causing him to blink and rapidly return to his senses. He called on the Force to give him a small boost, and realized that someone was calling his name.
"Come on, Doran!" He heard Tahiri yell.
Doran shoved himself off the ground, checking his bond with Sannah as he did so. She was still down, and unconscious. He looked around. Tahiri appeared to be the only other person awake. She was in a low crouch beneath one of the newly made craters, drying blood likewise coming from her ears and nose. Doran crawled to her side. "Sannah?" He asked, half verbally and half through the Force.
"One of the Mandalorians took the brunt of the blast," Tahiri motioned to where Sannah was lying prone beneath the deathly still body of Niner.
Doran's jaw clenched, not sure if he should feel relief or guilt that someone had died in Sannah's place. "Any escape plan?"

That last barrage wiped out the entrance to the Kyrimorut, and the Yuuzhan Vong forces are coming in from all directions," Tahiri shook her head.
"*Buir!*" *Father!*
The anguished cry of Etain Skirata marked her return to consciousness. The young Mandalorian woman had crawled to her father's form and was positioned by his and Sannah's side. She had also removed her helmet, and there was a bloodied bandage patch hastily applied to her stomach.
"If we stay here any longer, we're going to be flash-fried," Tahiri whispered to Doran. They glanced at the others, who were just beginning to come to their groans and curses indicating their awakening.
But not everyone was moving.
Doran and Tahiri crawled out of their cover to check on the others. Mereel had taken a direct hit from the barrage and the only thing left of him was his charred helmet—which had been thrown clear of his body in the explosion. Several of the Mandalorians they had tried to rescue had also died in the blast. Kom'rk Skirata, Jintar's father, had been one of the ones holding a beam cannon, and had jumped clear of the barrage. The shockwave, however, had rendered him unconscious and sprawled out inside a splintered, burnt-out log.
The survivors were quickly regaining conscious and scrambling for cover. Fi Skirata was assessing the various wounds as fast as he could. Doran, in the meantime, used his bond with Sannah to hasten her recovery time. He pressed his forehead against her own sweat-slickened one, willing her back to him.
"Come on Fish-Girl, sleep later," Doran muttered. The ground was shaking as the combined weight of eight *rakamat* closed in.
Sannah stirred.
"Hi," Doran said faintly.
Sannah nodded weakly, then, realizing where she was, woke up completely. "Oh."
"Yeah. Not a good time for a nap."
"The Mando'ade?"
"Hit bad," Doran grimaced. "Fi's working on Kom'rk. We lost Mereel and Niner."
"Oh," Sannah whispered again, remembering how it had only been yesterday when she had been happily chatting with them as the built the underground fortifications.
Doran peeked out of the foxhole. A much larger shadow passed overhead as two Yuuzhan Vong cruisers, escorted by two frigates,

made a fly-by over the scene. The Yuuzhan Vong forces had stopped their advance and were waiting in a loose perimeter around the remains of the entrance of the Kyrimorut. As the larger Yuuzhan Vong vessels landed in the nearby clearing, a sense of dread filled the air. The Yuuzhan Vong had been saving themselves for the last wave. Warriors, by the thousands flooded out of the vessels.
"Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"
"Fy'y Rogg! Fy'y Rogg!"
"Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"
"Fy'y Rogg! Fy'y Rogg!"
"Al'tanna Shimrra knotte Yun'o!"
The call-and-response of tens of thousands of Yuuzhan Vong warriors and shapers came out in a menacing bellow, an inhuman roar meant to intimidate and cow their opponents. They continued to pile out of the capital ships, escorted by hundreds of *rakamat* and other support creatures. It was a force meant to do only one thing, win.
"That's a massive dovin basal," Tahiri whispered to Doran and Sannah, spotting the alien device emerge from one of the ships.
"The type that brought down Sernpidal's moon?" Darman Skirata, the other member of the beam cannon unit who had survived looked on. He was still wearing a helmet, hiding the grief the loss of two of his brothers had caused and disappearing into the duty at hand.
Tahiri nodded her head once. "I wouldn't be surprised if they decided to just bring down a moon on this location. They can avoid casualties and still claim a victory."
"It's not like we can do anything about it at the moment," Fi pointed out. "We take one step out of this pit and those lizard people and Shaped Rodians will tear us apart. Even if we survive the lizards, there's no way we can take out all those *Vongese* with just the eleven of us. Even I'm not *that* good."
"We'll have to go and come back with the others," Darman agreed, unslinging the pack he was wearing and pulling out several devices. Just then, the sky lit up a bright red and green. Lasers the size of tree-trunks lanced downwards towards the landed vessels amidst a merciless barrage of missiles, torpedoes, and all sorts of ordinance. The frigates were lit up in an instant, vanishing under the bombardment. One of the cruisers was likewise ripped to shreds, its crew and compliment of warriors completely caught unawares. The blasts rippled outwards, dropping the Yuuzhan Vong warriors and shaking the ground with a thunderous rumble.
"I think our reinforcements have arrived," Corr remarked deadpan.

The orbital bombardment continued for another second, before a wave of TIE Fighters and X-wings came screaming out of the sky to strafe the devastated ground forces once more. With the ground around them already glassed, the ground forces had no place to hide. The remaining cruiser tried to take off again, but two Star Destroyers entered the atmosphere and began hammering the ship with everything they had. The alien cruiser managed to make it into the upper atmosphere before the damage it sustained became too great. In slow motion, its upwards ascent was halted and the gravity of Mandalore yanked it back down. Thousands of warriors were crushed beneath the cruiser's broken form, while the others were swamped in a cloud of ash and burnt soil thrown up by the impact.

The Star Destroyers headed back into orbit as more Yuuzhan Vong vessels hastily made their way to them, but the damage had been done. The tens of thousands of Yuuzhan Vong warriors had been reduced to a fraction of that number within a matter of seconds. And the X-wings and TIE Fighters still weren't finished. X-wings, with the distinctive markings of Kyp's Dozen, roared in and blasted at the *rakamat*s with laser and missile. The Chazrach soldiers were quickly scattering in panic, the *rakamats* were inadvertently trampling everyone around them in the confusion, while their four-legged reptilian allies chittered helplessly as the starfighters plowed through their ranks. The few Fire Breathers remaining proved no match for the torpedoes launched by the starfighters, disappearing in blazing balls of green flame.

But the air support didn't last for long. Seconds later, half a dozen squadrons of coralskippers chased the TIEs and X-wings away.

"And there goes our reinforcements," Corr said in the same deadpan.

"At least the enemy is disorganized for now," Kom'rk shrugged.

The entryway to the Kyrimorut was opened once more; the Mandalorians and other Jedi had succeeded in blasting and levitating their way through the debris.

"What are you waiting for, an invitation?" Ordo Skirata grumbled. "Get your *shebse* in here, that's an order!"

"Right away, sir!" Kom'rk gave a hasty salute as he and the others took advantage of the confusion to get to safety.

Noting the survivors as they poured into the Kyrimorut, Ordo reached out to temporarily halt Kom'rk. "Mereel? Niner?"

"With the rest of our brothers, waiting for us to catch up," Kom'rk said solemnly.

Ordo nodded curtly, saying nothing. A single hand, however, had balled into a tight fist as he cast one last look out into the scorched and body-

littered battlefield. A second detonation closed the Kyrimorut's entryway again, and for a short period, everything was silent.
([{Chapter End}])

ADA 51

Fifty-One
([{I}]) ([{I}])
Thump, thump. Thump, thump. Doran's heart pounded violently, eyes fluttering shut to reflexively block out a bright flash as his saber blocked two amphistaffs at once. All around him, Mandalorians were engaged in close quarters combat with a swarm of Yuuzhan Vong. Defying the death-trap tunnels the Mandalorians had built, the Yuuzhan Vong warriors had burst into the holding caverns behind their tunneling grutchyna by the hundreds. The battle was raging on well into the third day, the afternoon light was fading and steadily turning into twilight. With the ceiling practically collapsed on them, the Mandalorians had been hard pressed to recover their initial momentum. There was no 'Yuuzhan Vong side' or 'Mandalorian side' of the battlefield. Everyone was just mixed, fighting for their lives.
The hum of Doran's shimmering, cerulean blue lightsaber cut through the air, causing a razor bug to flare incandescently upon impact. The Yuuzhan Vong were steadily advancing, pushing the Mandalorians back towards the mountain caverns that was their last fallback point. At the same time, the alien invaders were paying for every square centimeter with the blood of their warriors. Still, surviving magma-spitters and *rakamat* continued to pound the area, the deafening explosions of the Yuuzhan Vong artillery units only accenting the madness that had consumed the region.
Doran managed to get the better of one of the five warriors he was facing; bringing his lightsaber half-way down the warrior's head and then slicing a quarter of the warrior's head off with a jerk of his arm. He promptly whirled back around to deflect the four other amphistaffs as the other warriors lunged at him. Dinua's plasma pistol shrieked and dropped two of his opponents. Other warriors rushed her, and she was soon locked in a fierce fight, pitting her vibroblade against several amphistaffs.
The teenage Jedi finished off the remaining two warriors with expert slices, and then hurried to Dinua to return the favor. He was exhausted from the near non-stop fighting. His arms were protesting his every movement and his eyes stung with the sweat that continued to drip down. The energy he had received from the few hours of sleep he had

managed to get during a lull in the fighting had already been expended hours ago. Yet, he received no reprieve.
All around, despite the full three days' worth of fighting, everyone was still facing upwards of six warriors at once. As the ceiling crumbled once more and let in streams of dying daylight, more warriors poured into the cavern. The sad truth was that there was simply more Yuuzhan Vong than there were Mandalorians, and every loss hurt much greater.
When the Yuuzhan Vong had first burst through the ceiling on the first day, everyone had been caught off-guard. There had been multiple breaches, and those nearest were badly wounded. Among the first to fall had been Clan Skirata patriarch, Kal Skirata. Yet, he had not gone down without a fight. As he lay broken in front of an onslaught of charging warriors, he detonated a belt of thermal detonators he had with him. The resulting explosion collapsed the tunnels and brought the others some much needed time to regroup.
Kal Skirata's loss had dealt a major blow to the morale of the Mandalorians, but the *Ori'ramikade* managed to rally the disheartened members of Clan Skirata just in time for the second wave of Yuuzhan Vong. The alien forces had been relentless, throwing everything they had at the Mandalorian fortress dwelling. Prudii Skirata joined the ranks of the dead, along with a squadron of *Ori'ramikade*, when they were simply overwhelmed by an onslaught of the enemy forces. The rush of Yuuzhan Vong, coming down both the tunnel, and through the ceiling, had left Prudii cut off. Even then, he and the Supercommandos had gone down fighting.
The next losses to Clan Skirata occurred shortly before the Yuuzhan Vong warriors pulled back for the night. In the middle of the close-quarters brawl the fight had descended into, a razor bug had decapitated A'den Skirata. No one had even noticed he was missing until the fighting had stopped. But he hadn't been the only one. All but one of Fi Skirata's four children had died in that day-long scrum. Nearly a third of the *Ori'ramikade* had also been wiped out by the deluge of Yuuzhan Vong warriors.
The second day hadn't started off any better. While trying to cover his brothers and sisters in arms from an unexpected surge of warriors, Fi Skirata and his wife were cut down by the onslaught. Bardan Skirata was out of the fight with near-fatal injuries sustained from a magma artillery strike. What *Ori'ramikade* had survived *that* day's worth of fighting, only lived to see more of the same carnage the next day. Mandalorians were falling by the minute, as the Yuuzhan Vong seemed hell-bent on completely exterminating every last armored individual they found.

It appeared as if the Yuuzhan Vong were now making one final push to end the fighting, throwing everything they had at the weary and exhausted defenders. The suicidal attacks were working, wearing everyone down and taking handfuls of lives with every passing second. The Jedi, too, were being pushed to and over their limits. And if nothing drastic happened, they would soon start joining the dead. As it was, Zekk was being attended to by a team of medics frantically trying to save his life. He had taken a blast bug to the chest trying to defend a group of Mandalorians, and then had been stabbed while he lay unconscious on the ground. In the distance Doran saw Tesar fall backwards with several amphistaffs sticking out of him, still feebly batting at his attackers.

Doran spun around in time to block another attack.

The meld was shrinking, and he cast about for his girlfriend, releasing a breath when he still felt her going strong. He cut down another Yuuzhan Vong, and then took one last, tired look at the state of things, his heart still pounding as he fought on.

Cut off from the rest of their allies by the onslaught, Tahiri and Klin-Fa were in a desperate battle to just stay alive. Tahiri's saber and amphistaff were working briskly in tandem, cutting down warriors in a deadly whirlwind. She and Klin-Fa were a lethal duo, snarling at the warriors in Yuuzhan Vong and moving in dizzying flurries of yellow and blue. Any Yuuzhan Vong who dared challenge the two didn't last long. The two young women weren't invincible though. They were covered in countless nicks and gashes, and their blood-coated hands fought to maintain a grip on their weapons. After the three days' worth of pitch battle, they were tiring fast. Despite a push by several Mandalorian units to reach them, they were still swamped by enemies and as far behind 'enemy lines' as one could get.

"This what you had in mind when you invited me to join you guys?" Tahiri said to Klin-Fa, panting as she half-heartedly batted aside an amphistaff thrust in her direction.

"I expected us to be winning a bit more by now," Klin-Fa said, favoring her right leg after her left had been impaled by two amphistaffs. "Also didn't expect to get stabbed as much."

"Almost reminds me of Myrkr," Tahiri breathed, her green eyes darting across the Vong-filled battlefield as projectiles from magma spitters rained down indiscriminately on the fighting forces.

"Oh? I've only heard stories, what happened?"

"Most everyone died," Tahiri shrugged morbidly.

"Forget I asked." Further conversation was halted as the Yuuzhan Vong pressed in on them again.

In another corner of the cavern, Jysella, with the blue lightsaber she had constructed on the ride over to Mandalore, was working alongside Sannah to protect a team of healers and medics. It was easier said than done. The Mandalorian wounded weren't in very high numbers, mainly because most of the wounds they received were instantly fatal. Those who did survive couldn't be safely moved without the healers and medics performing several precious minutes of emergency care.
"This is intense!" Jysella managed, a shaking hand bringing her lightsaber into position as another Yuuzhan Vong warrior charged their group. She tried to wet her lips as she rubbed her sweat-slickened forehead on her sleeve. Before the warrior made contact, though, Sannah's own blue lightsaber flew out and took out the warrior's legs at mid-thigh level.
"Tell me about it," Sannah replied, her Mandalorian armor was grimy and coated with blood and dust. She saw a large group of a dozen warriors forming up for a run on their position. "Medics! How much more time do you need?"
"At least two more minutes," came the reply, the medic in question had his hands deep in the chest of an injured Mandalorian.
"You'll have it!" Sannah shouted over the din. She reached out into the battlemeld and plastered a glowing neon sign above their position indicating their need for immediate support. Not that anyone was able to come to their aid. Lowbacca was surrounded by Yuuzhan Vong thrusting their amphistaffs at him. Corran Horn was on the other side of the cavern holding off yet another group of warriors. Valin Horn was in the thick of things by Doran's side. The other Jedi were acting as healers, tending to their own wounded.
"Sannah, we have a plan, right?" Jysella swallowed fearfully when no help materialized. The dozen warriors were now stampeding to them, ignoring the flurry of blaster fire that tried to cut them down.
"Yeah, don't die. Stay here and cover the medics," Sannah said grimly. She gently nudged her boyfriend to let him know that she loved him, and then met the Yuuzhan Vong charge with one of her own. Limbs began to fly everywhere as the dozen battle-hardened warriors were surprised that the tiny Jedi in Mandalorian armor would dare attack them. The surprise was enough to halt their momentum, Sannah showed no mercy. Legs, arms, hands, fell to the floor as Mandalorian fighting techniques were combined with the Force abilities of a Jedi to land maiming, near-lethal, yet survivable, blows. Though she wouldn't kill, and it often took more effort to land a non-fatal blow, Sannah had turned 'disarming' an opponent into an art form.

Jysella, emboldened by Sannah's success and heedless of her initial instructions, rushed in to help.
Corran Horn saw Jysella's charge from afar and his heart skipped a beat. Seeing your twelve-year old daughter charge a line of blood-thirsty, trained, killers with a lightsaber she had constructed only several days before, was just trouble waiting to happen. Only several seconds later, his worst fears came true. Corran yelled Jysella's name in anguish—his voice audible over the din of the battle and mingling with that of his son—when a warrior caught her from behind and drove his amphistaff through her shoulder. A second warrior's amphistaff pierced her front and came out at the small of her back.
Jysella collapsed to her knees, coughing up blood in the process. Sannah's fury echoed within the Jedi meld, and the Melodie Jedi quickly summoned Jysella's saber and became a raging blue storm. One hand after the other, the two blue lightsaber hummed and slashed. Kina Ha and another team of medics quickly moved to Jysella's side, ignoring the plethora of severed Vong limbs and groaning Vong.
Tahiri and Klin-Fa, who had only just gotten free of the corner they had been backed into, raced to form a protective line in front of the fallen twelve-year old. And as if a switch had been flipped, theirs and Sannah's combined fury eradiated outwards to affect all of the Mandalorians. The battle had gone on long enough; they *weren't* losing any more friends or family.
A Mandalorian battle cry went up and the blaster fire and explosions redoubled. Several of the surviving beam cannons blasted swaths of warriors into dust. Everyone reached for their last reserves of strength and pressed on. The Mandalorians surged forward like an unstoppable wave, spurred on by Jysella's plight and by their desire to end the fight. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors, who already had nothing to lose, tried to push back. But there was no stopping the very angry Jedi and Mandalorian forces. Side by side, the Jedi and Mandalorians fought, pushing hard against the overwhelming numbers of warriors. The last Baffor grenades were used, and in such an enclosed area, the gas clouds caused the Yuuzhan Vong warriors to die in their armor by the dozens.
Visible battle lines began to form as the Yuuzhan Vong were forced back down the kilometers of tunnels and into the Kyrimorut proper. With the Mandalorians of Clan Skirata leading the charge, Yuuzhan Vong began to fall at an even faster rate.
The battle raged on, until finally, the only Yuuzhan Vong warriors left alive were those wounded or dying. The last blaster shrieked. The last

saber whooshed back into its hilt. The last body fell. And then a deafening stillness rang out.
It was a victory for the Mandalorians and Jedi, but at what cost?
The only Jedi still standing after the day-long onslaught were Tyria, Tahiri, Lowbacca, Doran, Sannah, and Klin-Fa. Distracted by the injuries to his sister, Valin had been slapped upside the head with an amphistaff and had fallen clean onto a jagged rock lying on the ground, joining the ranks of the near-fatally wounded Jedi. Several medics were tending to him, and he was just hanging onto life. Even worse off than him was Scout; who was unmoving, lying deathly still in a growing pool of blood around her pale form.
Clan Skirata had taken the brunt of the initial assault and many times many had fallen. Now that the battle was over, there was finally time to mourn their losses.
The grief of the surviving members of Clan Skirata over the loss of Kal was made even more tangible by the loss of Mereel and the others. Jaing Skirata, who had been the last to see the patriarch, was seated alongside one of the tunnel walls, just staring vacantly at a three-sided knife which Kal had given to him in the patriarch's final moments. *I couldn't be prouder of you, my son. Go and live your lives the best you can. That's my final order to you and your brothers. Go! Live!*
Darman Skirata was kneeling by an injured Scout's side, his eyes watching the medics work on her with an almost desperate gleam to them. His face was stoic, but his thoughts were loud and clear as his eyes shown with repressed emotion. *Please, I lost father, my brothers…and her. You can't die too. Not this again. Come on Jetii, pull through damn it. You've always been so tough. Be tough one more time.*
Meanwhile Ordo Skirata attempted to distance himself from the loss of his mentor, as well as that of his brothers, by disappearing into his duties; reorganizing defensive lines. *Nar dralshy'a, haar'chak! If the Vongese come around again, I don't want them adding to our losses. Move those boulders and reform that barricade. Not one more drop of Mandalorian blood will be spilt today.*
The ever-joking Atin Skirata kept his forehead pressed to the helmet of Fi Skirata, as if continuing a silent conversation with the deceased. Once finished, he soundlessly passed the helmet over to Fi's only surviving son and solemnly walked out of the Kyrimorut and into the early night.
Corr Skirata had left the Kyrimorut immediately after the battle was over to locate Niner and Mereel's bodies. He wanted to ensure that they received the proper care and rites befitting of the heroes they had

been in life. He found Niner, as well as Mereel's helmet. Niner's daughter joined him in a silent vigil as they shared in their grief.
And the last of the surviving Clone War era-soldiers, Komr'k Skirata, was busy enough trying to ensure that no more of his own family died. He and Dinua were by Jintar's side as the surgeons operated on the younger Mandalorian amidst the corpse-strewn battlefield. Dinua herself was cradling an obviously very badly fractured arm and doing her best to comfort both herself and the pale and shaken Komr'k.
Of the nearly nine hundred Mandalorians sent to defend the Kyrimorut, including the members of Clan Skirata, less than forty remained. In exchange, however, the attacking force of thousands of Yuuzhan Vong warriors, and the innumerous number of their thrall armies, had been completely decimated. Though the Mandalorians could scarcely endure another attack, neither could the Yuuzhan Vong.
"Receiving word from our fleet," an exhausted Tyria said weakly, forcing her legs to take her to the Mandalorians keeping up the defenses. "The Yuuzhan Vong have withdrawn. Smuggler Alliance supply and medical ships are already en route. The battle really is over."
"The battle maybe," Ordo said tersely. "But not the war. The Mandalorians will regroup, rebuild, and we will make the Yuuzhan Vong pay for the lives they have taken."
([{II}]) ([{II}])
Vergere and the five Jedi from the Galactic Republic sat in the back of a large amphitheater as all the Ferroans gathered for a momentous announcement from Sekot. Despite Sekot's warmth to these foreign visitors, the Ferroans did not appear to share the same feelings. As they piled in from all around, most stopped to give the Jedi scowls or hostile glares.
"Sekot seems more than willing to help, but the Ferroans don't," Jaina whispered softly.
"We'll have to convince the Ferroans somehow," Luke said. "They'll have to see the danger of the Yuuzhan Vong finding Zonama Sekot again if they stay."
When the last of the Ferroans filtered in, Jabitha, the Ferroan Magistrate, stood and assumed a position in the center of the stage. The low din that had filled the air ceased as she held out her hands.
"My friends, we have been summoned here today because it is the will of Sekot. As many of you know, for the last few days, we have been playing host to several Jedi. These Jedi bring with them a warning, but also a request. The Far Outsiders, the kin of those who attacked us only recently, have come to this galaxy. Our location is no longer as

safe as it once was. The Jedi wish for us and Sekot to join in the fight against the Far Outsider, and when the war is over, to provide shelter for the Far Outsiders."
At that announcement, cries of distress, anger, and disbelief rang out from all around.
"I knew the Jedi would only be bad news!"
"They wish us to experience the Crossings once more!"
"We don't want them here, send them away!"
Jabitha held out a hand. "We may not have wished for them to visit, but they are here now. The fact that the Far Outsiders came before them shows that Zonama Sekot has truly been located once again."
"Sekot can defend us, let the Jedi fight their own war," another Ferroan growled out.
"I understand your pain, Darak," Jabitha said softly. "I also share your fear. For many a year we have found safety and solitude in our hidden corner of this galaxy. Much of that time was spent recovering from the anguish we experienced during the Crossings. But we have recovered now. This galaxy is as much our home as it is the home of the Jedi. And, as strong as Sekot is, Sekot is not invincible. Sooner or later we will face a threat that not even Sekot can handle by her lonesome. We need allies to ensure our lives remain as peaceful as possible."
"So to obtain peace, we have to fight for it? The Jedi bring nothing but violence and more death," another Ferroan scoffed. "Have you already forgotten the thousands that died en route to this location? Was not their deaths high enough a cost for the peace we have now? I say we run, run and hide like we did before. Sekot is older now and can protect us better. "
"There are only so many places we can hide, Senshi," Jabitha said. "Only so long we can run."
"What is Sekot's will, then?" Rowel, a male Ferroan bora farmer, asked. "Has Sekot decided to help these Jedi?"
Jabitha gazed upwards at the speaker. "Sekot wishes all of us to come to a consensus first. Sekot does not want to force a decision on us that will impact all of our lives. If, after hearing the Jedi and reviewing all of the facts, we decide as a people *not* to help the Jedi or the people of the galaxy, than Sekot will respect our wishes. Of course, the reverse is also true. If we agree to help the Jedi and allow the Far Outsiders to live among us on Zonama, Sekot will support our decision and do its best to aid us in that endeavor. Either way, our future is in our hands. We can continue to run and hide, or rejoin the galaxy once more and end a great war that has caused much suffering."

"We don't need to hear the Jedi speak. They can only bring bad tidings to us!"
"Sekot can protect us!"
"Jedi go away!"
"My friends!" Jabitha stressed. "Please, at least give them a chance to explain themselves before you pass judgment. As recent events have shown, more will only come, Far Outsiders and Jedi, if we send this group away."
There was some grumbling, but the crowd quieted down.
"Will the Jedi Vergere and Anakin Solo please state your case for us?" Jabitha motioned to the two.
The next few minutes were spent with Anakin summarizing the war for the Ferroans, describing in great detail just why the war needed to end and what was at stake. Vergere then stepped forward to explain her time with the 'Far Outsiders' and why Zonama Sekot would be a good home for them. She, of course in her own riddling ways, then described the companions she traveled with now and why it would be good to heed their warnings. Overall, however, the two continued to make it known that the help of the Ferroan people was needed in this endeavor. That as strong as Sekot was, even Sekot wasn't all-powerful or all knowing. It would be up to the Ferroans to teach the Yuuzhan Vong about the myriad of life forms growing on Zonama. It would be up to the Ferroans to help the Yuuzhan Vong grow accustomed to a life of peace. Anakin and Vergere didn't exactly beg, but they weren't exactly subtle as they entreated the Ferroans for their help to end the war and their aid for what came after.
"You realize what you're asking us, Jedi?" The Ferroan farmer, Senshi, said softly. "You're asking us to give up this peace that we have known, the stability that so many have died for, for the trillions of others in this galaxy we have never met, nor want anything to do with. We were a part of your galaxy once, when Sekot was young. Your Jedi came here to exploit Sekot's ships. The Far Outsiders found us during their visit and attack. We survived, only to be chased away from our original homes by your metal ships. The Far Outsider visit could be attributed to a misunderstanding between they and Sekot, like you and Vergere have said, but it was the ships of this galaxy that gravely hurt Zonama Sekot and forced us to run. Why now, after all these years, should we assist a galaxy whose people caused the untold deaths of so many Ferroans, my entire family included? Why should we sacrifice the peace we have devoted our lives to just because some strangers come and tell us it's for the good of everyone else?"

"I understand your dubiousness," Anakin said gently. "All of you have lost much. This peace you have here is your most treasured possession. But please think on what Vegere and I have said. Now that the Far Outsiders have found you once again, times will change quickly. It is the hope of many of the Far Outsiders that they can live beside you, starting a new life, a peaceful life. The Far Outsider aggressors will have lost their reason to fight once they realize that they already have a home with Zonama Sekot, with you. You, and Zonama, represent the hope they have of ending the ceaseless cycles of war and violence that have plagued their people. We are not asking for Sekot to fight our war. Nor are we asking the Ferroans to sacrifice that peace that you have found here. We are asking all of you to honor those lives loss in the Crossings by sharing your hard-wrought peace, so that no one else has to die. Should you agree to help us, you won't just be saving the people of this galaxy, but those of the Far Outsider's galaxy as well."

"We are all on the verge of a new era, whether you choose to help, or to run," Vergere eyed the crowd solemnly. "Change can be easy or hard, but change is something you cannot stop no matter how hard you try. Delay, maybe, but never stop. You all share the belief of the Potentium, that this life force is embodied in all living beings, in every rock and stone of Zonama. Will you be so blind as to turn away from the countless others for the selfish need to horde this peace you have? Will you ignore the sufferings of the rest of the galaxy, shut your ears to their cries of anguish, simply to live on in an ignorant bliss? And for how long? The Far Outsiders have found you twice now. They will continue to do so. Fleet after fleet. Ship after ship. Sekot has already told you that Sekot wasn't able to stop one of their ships from escaping; and that was just a scouting patrol. Sekot can't protect you all forever. And when the rest of the galaxy has fallen to the Far Outsiders, who then will come to your aid? You have the choice to stand with the rest of the galaxy, or fall with them. It may not be in ten years, or even twenty, but you *will* all fall if you remain alone and isolated. Consider *that* in your deliberation. Now, the young Solo and I have said all that needed to be said. The fate of trillions now hangs in your hands."

Vergere motioned, and both she and Anakin walked away from the stage and back up to their seats.

Jabitha stepped forwards again, placing two large pitcher-like flowers on the stage. "We will have a vote now. Each of you has been given a token to signify your opinion. After deliberating amongst yourselves for the next few moments, when you are ready, place the token into the

flower on the left to vote to aid the Jedi, the flower on the right to retreat further into dark space and begin the Crossings anew in search of a safer home."
In the low din that broke out as the Ferroans contemplated their decision, Mara leaned over to her husband. "What do you think they'll pick, Farmboy?"
"Hard to say," Luke murmured. "Senshi appears to have quite the following. And we *are* asking a lot of the Ferroans."
"What will happen if they vote not to help us?" Jaina asked with a whisper.
"Nothing good," Jacen said. He glanced briefly at Anakin. "Do we have a 'Plan B,' Little Brother?"
Anakin shook his head slowly. "All of our ewoks are in this tree. If it goes down, like Vergere said, so do we."
"We'll have no choice but to fight the Yuuzhan Vong militarily," Mara said reluctantly.
"Not to mention the fact that we'll look a little less godly in the eyes of the Freed Ones," Jacen pointed out.
The Magister was the first to cast her vote, placing her token into the red flower on the left. She was immediately countered by Senshi, who placed his token in the flower on the right. Others began to go up, one by one.
"What happens if the vote is evenly matched?" Mara said, watching as the number of people voting left seemed to be about the same as those voting right.
"The tiebreaker will be Sekot, of course," Vergere chortled. "Sekot may have told the Magister that Sekot respects the wishes of the Ferroans, but that is only partly true. Sekot, after all, is the consciousness of this entire planet. It will not do something it strongly disagrees with."
"Although it doesn't look like that will happen," Jaina said, as a swell of voters stood and gathered around the flower on the left to wait their turn to deposit their token.
"It's going to be strange for the Ferroans, though," Jacen muttered. "I mean, they're probably a community of a little over thirty or so thousand people. If they agree to help us, they'll have several million neighbors with a distinctly different culture and lifestyle. Some of the more conflict-prone Yuuzhan Vong might try to rally others against the Ferroans, seeing as the Ferroans will be in the minority."
"That's why I'll be staying here," Anakin said, earning surprised glances from his family.
"Anakin?" Mara raised an eyebrow.

"I've done a lot of thinking about this since we've come here, and I think that it's the right decision."
"So you'll stay here, with the Ferroans, with the Vong, by yourself?" Jaina said incredulously.
"I'm sure others will stay too," Anakin smiled. "Since the Freed Ones have become an organized government, more and more people have been getting to know the Yuuzhan Vong. Like the commandos from Borleias, or Danni Quee and Tekli. We can help make sure there's a smooth transition and integration between the Yuuzhan Vong and Ferroans, between war and peace."
"That's not your only reason, is it?" Luke said, his voice pained.
Anakin met his uncle's gaze evenly, his smile fading. "No, it isn't. It's been made perfectly clear over the past few weeks that my interpretation of the Force, coupled with my influence over the younger generation of Jedi, isn't a good thing. By staying on Zonama, I'll be removing myself from any sort of position of power or influence. I'll also prevent any schisms from forming in the newly repaired Jedi Order. Waxarn Kel's people have already begun distancing themselves. Hopefully, with me gone, they'll return to the Order in full."
"Anakin…" Jaina looked at a loss for words.
"It's not like I want to leave everyone behind," Anakin said with a faint smile. "Although helping the Yuuzhan Vong adjust will be beneficial in the long run. But the Order can't handle dissention at this time. Nor do they need a lightning rod that will draw the eyes of the media who will scrutinize their every decision. Especially not when the war is over and everyone is healing and repairing from the toll it had taken. The Order needs to remain strong, and if it'll be stronger with me away, then that's what has to happen. Besides, knowing Tahiri, she'll probably stay on Zonama as well. The Yuuzhan Vong are as much her people as the Jedi are."
"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jacen said. Having recently repaired his relationship with his brother, the last thing he wanted was to have Anakin go away. "Isn't there some other way we can keep the Order stable?"
Anakin shook his head. "I've become a focal point for the animosity of Waxarn Kel's followers, for the frustration and disappointment of the galaxy. Even before we left, I've heard people saying I had *too* much influence and power in the government. With me out of the picture, everyone can focus on what's important. And that's fixing up the damage caused by this war."
"But I'm on the High Council," Jacen argued. "You also have the support of Saba, of Master Hamner and Durron. Even the younger Jedi

support you. You don't have to exile yourself just because a vocal few disagree with you. If we speak out on your behalf…"
"Don't," Anakin said quickly. "That's the biggest mistake the council can make. All you have to do is say that I've been place on an indefinite assignment to Zonama to help the Yuuzhan Vong. There may be a vocal few, but that small crack in the Order is all that's needed for a bigger fracture later on."
"And what about your supporters?" Jaina spoke up. "You can't seriously expect the others to stay quiet."
"Why would they have a reason to speak out in the first place?" Anakin said innocently. "Everyone knows that I support the Freed Yuuzhan Vong. And peace and prosperity is what the Jedi focus most on. No one will question it if I publically say that I'm staying on Zonama Sekot for the Yuuzhan Vong."
"I don't like it," Jacen shook his head. "I joined the High Council not just to protect this galaxy, but to protect my family too. Just because you have a different view of the Force, because a few people blame the miseries this war has caused on you, doesn't mean you should be forced out like this. What good is a voting position on the Council if I can't even shield you, Little Brother, from something like this?"
"Being 'exiled' as you say, to here, really isn't all that bad," Anakin glanced at the tampasi that grew all around. "Nice and quiet, a good place to settle down and have a family."
"With Tahiri?" Jaina said. Though she didn't like the idea of her brother being forced out any more than Jacen did, she had to admit that Anakin and Tahiri definitely deserved some peace time.
"With Tahiri," Anakin nodded wryly. "Don't worry so much about me, Jace, Jaya. No matter what happens, I know that the two of you have my back. Just trust me on this, okay? It's for the better."
Jaina nodded, but Jacen remained silent, his displeasure clear.
"Jace?'
Jacen forced himself to smile. "Right. I guess I'll have to step it up a notch to fill in the vacuum you'll be leaving."
"Sorry about that."
"So long as you're safe and happy, Little Brother," Jacen said, reaching over to place a hand on Anakin's shoulder. "You just let me and Jaina handle the politicians and Jedi-trying-to-be-politicians."
The Ferroan vote, which was only partly complete due to the thirty-thousand Ferroans that had to cast their token, continued. But it was clearly a foregone conclusion. Despite the initial swell of those voting to run, almost everyone else was waiting to deposit their token to show their support of the Jedi plan. Only an additional few hundred or so

others voted otherwise, looking on in disbelief at the vast show of support at the opposite line.
When the vote was finally over, 'night' had fallen onto the planet again. The two flowers being used as basins to collect the tokens glowed brightly from their own bioluminescence; the shadows of the tokens inserted into them a clear sign of the results.
Jabitha took one look at them, then looked up to the crowd. "So be it. We have voted to help the Jedi and the galaxy."
A rush of wind and particles whistled through the amphitheater, and Sekot appeared in the form of a male Ferroan who strongly resembled Jabitha.
"You have all chosen to assist the Jedi," Sekot began. "I approve and support your decision. You have made the right choice." Sekot looked to the Jedi. "When the time comes, we will be ready. I look forward to having the Far Outsiders live here. Their own view of the galaxy should be very interesting indeed."
"Thank you," the Jedi bowed respectfully.
"You are welcome," Sekot smiled sagely. "Until the time comes, however, you are all welcome to stay here and learn more about this planet. Perhaps you can even plot out the areas which you think are the most suitable for the Far Outsiders."
([{III}]) ([{III}])
Shaeri placed her hand on the transparasteel window and stared at the burning world below with a pained expression. She was onboard the next-gen MC-90 Mon Calamari Cruiser the *Alderaan's Fury*, the flagship of Garm Bel Iblis' second-in-command, Colonel Kadra Bres. In the same room with Shaeri were some of the survivors of the joint Galactic Alliance-Imperial taskforce that had come to reinforce Mandalore. The fact that the large lounge was nearly empty was a testament as to how few had survived the bloody and brutal fighting down on the surface. Filling the cruiser's vast hangar bays were row after row of caskets. Docking bays were full of burnt and damaged fighters and gunboats, with engineer crews still working to cut out some of the bodies from the wrecks. Both the ground and space forces had suffered numerous losses, but that was nothing compared to the one and a half million Mandalorians who lay dead on Mandalore and its moons. Even in orbit, great glowing craters where cities had once been were still burning strong. The entire countryside was ravaged, with thick clouds of smoke covering most of the planet. Barely anything was left of the heavily populated moon of Concordia; its surface a pock-marked, desolate, graveyard.

"So much death," Shaeri whispered brokenly. Her hand curled into a fist as she pressed her forehead against the viewport. "Hapes, Borleias, Barab, and now this…this destruction. When will it ever end? When will my people learn that this isn't the way to create a future for anyone?"
"At least not all of the Yuuzhan Vong think like Shimrra's followers do," Kyp Durron tried to comfort the fifteen year-old Yuuzhan Vong teen. "Your people are learning, the Freed Yuuzhan Vong *are* making a difference."
"But not fast enough!" Shaeri whirled around to look at Kyp. "This war needs to be over, and soon. I *pray* for the day when all of my people are living together peacefully, in harmony with each other and with the rest of the galaxy. It's a dream I want to see so badly it hurts. And when I look at this," she gestured back at the ravaged planet. "All I can think about is how far away that dream seems. How can the war possibly end if the warriors think that killing others can create a better future? If the shapers think that their work is best suited by creating things that bring only death? If the priests and Intendant caste think that continuing this bloody crusade is the only way we can make a home for ourselves, to satisfy some perverted version of the gods we worship? How can we possibly hope to live without fighting when there is dissention even among the Freed Yuuzhan Vong? Already the defectors are fighting for power, trying to undermine Taan and everything we've been shedding blood over to achieve. I just want this war to be over. For there to be no more deaths, no more homes lost, no more wondering if we're going to survive into the next day, if your friends and family will survive. Just no more."
Shaeri finished her speech and sunk to her knees, tears trailing down her cheeks. Tahiri knelt by the despondent younger teen, wrapping her arms around her. "That day is coming, soon. Even now Anakin and the others are with Zonama Sekot. Even now the numbers of the Freed Ones double with every passing week. Your dream will come true, there's no doubt about that. And very soon, we will have that peace that we have fought so hard to get, sacrificed so much for. The Yuuzhan Vong *and* the people of this galaxy."
Shaeri nodded weakly, shifting so that she could rest her head against Tahiri's shoulder. "If you say it, my goddess, then it must be true. Yun-Shuno is wise after all. You can use your Force to see the future."
"You got that right," Tahiri muttered, keeping an arm around the younger teen. "And you and I will be on Zonama Sekot with all the others, just relaxing and enjoying the sun. Watching human and Yuuzhan Vong kids play together without fear or hatred."

"Watching warriors try to grow crops," Shaeri added with a small laugh. "And you and Anakin making kissy faces."
Tahiri lightly shoved the younger teen. "And you and Czalpak courting without any demand of a breeding cycle."
A flushed Shaeri looked up at Tahiri and stuck her tongue out at her, a very human gesture which showed just how acculturated Shaeri had become in her year and a half of living amongst the Jedi and their friends. Tahiri fondly rubbed Shaeri's arm. "You'll get that dream, Shaeri. All this fighting and warmongering will pass and a time of healing and peace will begin."
"Here here," Kyp raised his drink-filled mug in agreement.
When Colonel Kadra Bres entered the partially filled lounge a moment later and shared a brief kiss with Kyp, eyebrows were raised. The colonel stayed for only a moment, to whisper something to Kyp, before leaving the room.
"Master Durron?" Tahiri tilted her head.
"Jedi Knight Kwaad?" Kyp mimicked Tahiri's stance, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.
Tahiri smiled gently. "I'm just glad you're happy."
"Blame it on you and Anakin and on all you young people," Kyp said, shifting as some color came to his cheeks.
"Us?" A pale, but bandaged and conscious Valin Horn said.
"Yeah," Kyp took on a distant expression as he moved to the vacated viewport to stare at the planet below. "During our adventure into Imperial space, I lost a lot of good friends. Some…their deaths hurt me more than I thought they would. I mean, I've lost friends before, but… Anyways, after watching Tahiri and Anakin, Jaina and Jag, and all those other cutesy couples I realized that I shouldn't be taking anyone for granted. Kadra and I had hit it off well when we met on Tatooine for Anakin's little adventure. When we met up again as part of Garm Bel Iblis' joint Imperial taskforce, well…" Kyp trailed off and smiled faintly. "I wasn't going to let another opportunity slip by me."
"I know what you mean," Tahiri said softly. "Back on Myrkr, I almost didn't kiss Anakin before he went off to do some stupid heroic act. If it wasn't for that magma spitter that shook the ground…I don't even want to think about where all of us would be right now."
"But like you said, things are turning out for the better," Kyp said, inclining his head at Shaeri and Tahiri. "Now if you'll excuse me, Colonel Bres has a bit of downtime; rare for a woman in command of a fleet of capital ships and several fighter wings."
"Go," Tahiri grinned.

Kyp tipped an imaginary hat. "As you command, Jedi Knight Kwaad." The Jedi Master left the room whistling a jaunty tune.
When he was gone, Tahiri's comlink chirped. "*Tahiri, this is Leia on the Falcon. We're currently having Czalpak over for a meal. We've also managed to get HoloNet contact with the Unknown regions back up and running thanks to the efforts of Natua, Seff, and the other apprentices. Anakin has quite a story to tell. Would you and Shaeri care to join us?*"
Tahiri saw Shaeri's eyes widen almost comically at the mention of Czalpak, and she couldn't help but chuckle. "Sure, we'll be right there, *Falcon*. Tahiri out."
Perhaps things were slowly looking up indeed.
([{IV}]) ([{IV}])
Jedi Apprentice Sannah of the Melodie, and Jedi Apprentice Doran Sarkin-Tainer, were both sitting on the blackened edge of the cliff-face by the Kyrimorut, just looking out into the dark grey sea. They may have been only apprentices, but titles meant very little in a war like the one they were fighting. Titles, however high or low, didn't shelter them from the death and destruction, from the loss of friends, or the other horrors of war.
Smoke continued to billow up into the sky, turning the sun a hellish red and blocking out most of its light. The sea itself was sprinkled with ash, debris, and the remains of shot down vessels. Bodies, Yuuzhan Vong and Mandalorian, lay strewn in the jagged rocks below; their blood staining the nearest tides red.
Not even the once pristine waters had escaped the carnage of the battle.
Neither apprentice said anything. What was there to say after experiencing the equivalent of hell for the past week? Even after the fighting for the Kyrimorut had stopped, they still had to clear out pockets of Yuuzhan Vong warriors from the surrounding area. And then came the equally tiresome and emotional task of clearing out the bodies to prevent disease from spreading. The two teens were spent, physically and emotionally. They just sat on the ledge, holding hands and drawing support from their powerful Force bond; needing to feel something other than the death they had been surrounded by for the past week.
Footsteps from behind them.
The two apprentices were soon joined by an equally quiet Dinua and Jintar. Dinua's arm was in a sling, and Jintar was covered in head to toe in bandages and bacta patches. The Mandalorian teens mimicked

Sannah and Doran's actions, sitting on the ledge with one hand griping the hand of the other.
For the longest time, the four just sat there. The wind whipped around them; the smell of burning wood, flesh, and soil, a constant reminder of what they had just been through. The smell caused their hands to tighten around the other ever so slightly. The breeze passed by, and the teens relaxed ever so slightly. The sun was once again dipping below the horizon, marking the end of the sixth day of the Battle for Mandalore and the end of the battle itself.
Sannah shifted, resting her head on her boyfriend's lap. Dinua, in turn, leaned lightly against Jintar's shoulder, her own eyes fluttering close as exhaustion finally got the better of the super soldier. Jintar and Doran eventually stood and exchanged significant glances as they supported their sleeping significant other. They both managed to carry their girlfriends back to the makeshift quarters outside the Kyrimorut. Once they had placed their girlfriends into cots that had been set up, they slid in next to them. Barely a second later, Doran and Jintar were likewise asleep, escaping from the harsh world around them into unconsciousness.
When the four next awoke, the sun was high in the sky. Several atmospheric cleaning vessels supplied by the Smuggler's Alliance were floating over the Kyrimorut, sucking in the smoke and clearing the air. This allowed the sun's natural light to shine through, unfiltered, for the first time in days.
Doran rubbed at his eyes as Sannah stirred against him. He looked up at the nearest figure and smiled faintly. "Hi, mom."
"You are getting far too comfortable with having your mother catch you and your girlfriend in bed together," Tyria raised an eyebrow.
Doran laughed weakly. "Built up immunity."
"Uh huh," Tyria smiled. The heavy bags under her eyes and the way her faint wrinkles appeared more predominate showed that the past few days hadn't been kind to her either. "Anyway, I wanted to say goodbye to you and Sannah."
"Huh?" She now had Doran's full attention, while Sannah froze against Doran's chest to listen in.
"Kina Ha, and when Bardan and Scout recovers, have agreed to take the two of you as their temporary apprentices for the near future," Tyria explained. "I knew that the two of you would jump at the chance, so I'll be leaving you in their care."
"Really?" Sannah whispered in amazement.

"Really really," Tyria nodded. "They're more than eager to teach the two of you a few tricks from the golden period of the Jedi Order. Use this time wisely."
"Wow," Doran whistled. "Sannah, am I still dreaming?"
Sannah reached over and pinched him, causing him to yelp. "Doesn't seem like it."
"Thanks a lot," Doran muttered, rubbing his arm.
Tyria smiled fondly at the two. "Keep looking out for each other, you two. You definitely make a great team."
"Yeah, we do," Doran said, keeping his arms around the Melodie teen.
"The older Jedi don't mind the two of us together?"
"They're all for it," Tyria laughed. "Remember, these Jedi have been Mandalorian-ized."
"Great," Sannah groaned. "A Dinua with Force powers."
"If only!" Dinua called out from the nearby cot. "Could you three keep it down? Trying to get some rest here."
"Looks like we'll be staying a bit longer, Dinua," Doran said fondly.
"Enjoy whatever's left of *Manda'yaim,*" Dinua drawled. "I'm being shipped out with the rest of the fight-capable *Or'ramikade* to help take the war to the *Vongese*. I get to help free Ord Mantell from their clutches tomorrow. War doesn't wait for anyone."
"But your arm is shattered in five places!" Sannah protested.
"Nothing bacta and metal bolts can't fix on the ride over," Dinua shrugged. "Besides, I can still fire a blaster and fight with my other hand. I'm ambidextrous, remember?"
"Stupid Mandalorians," Sannah muttered. "Don't get yourself killed then, Dinua."
"I won't," Dinua's voice softened. She then grinned over at her bed-partner "Besides, I have to live long enough for my fathers to officiate my wedding with this big lug. Provided *he* gets better too."
"How are you doing, Jintar?" Doran said, tilting his head back to look at Jintar and Dinua's cot.
"I've got a couple more days of leave, but I'll be joining the others at Ord Mantell, or wherever else they'll be at, after that."
"You stay alive too, Jintar."
"Naturally."
"Tyria, where are *you* going?" Sannah said softly.
"I'll hang out with the Wraiths for a while," Tyria said. "And I'll let the Force take me from there."
"To places like Bakura and Mandalore?" Doran chimed in innocently.
Tyria scowled. "You're not too old that I still can't ground your butt Doran."

"But you're leaving me here with all these mean Mandalorians, isn't that punishment enough?"
"I'm leaving you with Sannah, unsupervised, with people who embrace family-making," Tyria retorted. "Doesn't that make me the best mom ever?"
Doran rolled out of the cot and quickly hugged his mother. "You *are* the greatest mom. I'm going to miss you."
Tyria returned the hug. "You too, Doran. You be careful out here, okay?"
"Sannah will make sure of it," Doran smiled, gesturing to Sannah.
The Melodie teen climbed out of the cot to join in the hug. "Of course I will."
Tyria held the two tightly, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "Alright then, I should go before I change my mind."
She took a step back and gave the two one last long look. "May the Force be with the both of you."
"You too, mom. You too."
([{V}]) ([{V}])
With the Battle of Mandalore finished and the Yuuzhan Vong withdrawn, the allied forces were slowly beginning their pull out. Only the flagships of the Imperial forces and Garm Bel Iblis's team remained, escorted by five Freed Yuuzhan Vong capital ships. Nearly a week had passed since the ending of the battle. The Imperials, Freed Yuuzhan Vong, and Garm Bel Iblis' taskforce had taken heavy casualties holding off an attacking force nearly thrice their size.
Yet, their staggered arrival into the battle zone had taken the Yuuzhan Vong by surprise. Cautious of a trap, the alien invaders hadn't fully committed their forces to meet these new attackers until well into the second day of battle. In a flash, the space battle went from strategic maneuvering and cautious probing attacks to an all-out onslaught and slugfest.
When the Yuuzhan Vong forces on the ground were defeated, however, their forces in orbit seemed to become demoralized; and for a good reason. Nearly a hundred thousand warriors and auxiliary forces had been sent to pacify the planet. Three quarters of that attack force had been sent down to the planet to wage the ground battles needed for a complete victory. Entire domains, to the last man, had dedicated everything they had to the battle. But as news of repeated ground defeats began to make their way back to the fleet, even the most stalwart and die-hard commander could see that the battle was lost. The Yuuzhan Vong had pulled out, leaving their crippled ships and

surviving ground forces to the mercy of the Galactic Alliance and the Mandalorians.
Several days after the fighting had ended, the fate of the surviving Yuuzhan Vong was finally being decided.
"When myself or one of the others walk by you, you will tell us your age, domain, and your reason for surrendering to us. Only some of you will be allowed back into this war to fight alongside the ranks of the Jedi. The rest of you will be placed in classes designed to teach you how to handle a post-war life. There will be no retribution. No punishment for taking up arms against this galaxy." The Freed One, Czalpak, spoke calmly, standing in front of a massive gathering of prisoners in a burnt out field. Mandalorian Protectors formed a perimeter, all of them training their weapons on the kneeling Yuuzhan Vong before them. "All of you here have surrendered, rather than take your own lives, for a reason. All of you realize that a life other than the ones proscribed to you by Shimrra and his underlings, is possible. You have all heard of the Freed Ones. Those who refuse to bow down to the wishes of a warmongering madman. Some of you may consider me a heretic for even saying that, but I do not care. The fact is, all of you chose to continue living. For whatever reason, from this moment on, all of you are freed from the shackles placed upon you by Shimrra. Freed from the burden and requirements you were forced to carry since our journey here. By choosing to surrender, by choosing life, you are all Freed Ones."
As the Freed Yuuzhan Vong who had come with the Galactic Alliance reinforcements began the streamlined process of going through the survivors, a small audience consisting of Sannah, Doran, Tahiri, Valin, Jysella, and Shaeri, looked on.
"How many surrendered this time?" Tahiri asked in a low voice.
"Close to a thousand, mostly warriors, but a few Shamed Ones managed to survive," Shaeri murmured. "There are still others in the ships in orbit that we haven't gotten to yet. There's a lot of debris up there."
"I thought these warriors believed that capture by an enemy was more dishonorable than a loss," Valin hissed. "Why are so many warriors surrendering, especially after they tried their damnedest to kill us only a couple days ago?"
"It's like Ebaq Nine or Obroa-Skai," Tahiri explained in a low voice. "The warrior caste is highly religious. They believe that the gods are with Shimrra and that Yun-Yammka approves of their campaigns. The more times we beat them, the less likely that seems. You lose enough big battles and you start to wonder if the gods truly are with Shimrra. You

come to this planet with overwhelming odds and firepower and lose against a ground force ten to twenty times smaller than your own, and even the most faithful will begin to doubt."
"And how do we know that there aren't, like, spies in this group?" A recently released from her bacta tank, Jysella said.
"There probably will be some," Shaeri nodded. "We've had problems with infiltrators in the past. It's why only a dozen or so of the warriors you see here will be joining us to fight at our side. The rest will be placed into positions meant to both ready them for the end of the war, but also to show them alternative lifestyles that will hopefully make any spies think twice about their own activities. Of course nothing is foolproof, but Taan wants to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. The alternative is to imprison all of them, but that won't help us in the long run."
"And the Mandalorians are willing to just let them get away without any punishment? After what they did to this planet? It seems more trouble than it's worth to go through all this." Valin said. After the incident on Yaga Minor, he had forced himself into thinking that Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong were the enemy and deserved little mercy. To leave some alive after they just massacred a million and a half living beings seemed incomprehensible. Especially since he was present and witnessed the attack firsthand.
"Most of the ones you see here are all that's left of their domain," Shaeri said, there was a harshness in her voice that caused Valin to jerk in surprise. "Because they blindly followed the orders of Shimrra, they've lost their entire family, their friends, their purpose for living. Their entire domain, the ship they called their home, lay in ruins in orbit and rotting on this planet. I think that they've already been punished, don't you think, Jedi Horn?"
"You can't see all of the Yuuzhan Vong as enemies," Tahiri added reproachfully. "It's thoughts like that that will prevent any sort of peaceful resolution to this war from occurring. Killing every last one of the enemy, though a way to end the war, isn't the fastest or the best. The best way to end a war is to turn your enemy to your way of thinking. That way the both of you are alive at the end and your side is stronger than ever. The Mandalorians, who know war pretty much better than any of us, know this as well. It's why they've agreed to let *us* handle the survivors."
Valin didn't back down. "Still, I don't think the people they've killed, the others in the galaxy they've made suffer, will accept that. You say that these Yuuzhan Vong have suffered enough by losing their entire family. But what about all the families *they* have ruined? About all the

homes they razed and the lives they've taken." He gestured towards one of the Yuuzhan Vong Sannah had maimed. "A centimeter to the left and I would have lost my sister! We shouldn't be happily welcoming whoever has the brains to surrender to us just because they've realized they're on the losing side. We should show them that there's consequence for ruining our galaxy, for mass murder and terrorism. When we do things like this, it's like…like we're rewarding them for everything they've done so far."
"Not rewarding, forgiving." A new voice said.
The small audience turned and saw Verde Vizsla approach with a small group of battered-looking Mandalorians in tow.
"Forgiving?" Valin repeated.
"Forgiving the crimes they committed and moving on for a brighter future," Verde said calmly. "One of the things you need to learn, *Jetii*, is that you *always* leave your enemy an out. Would you have preferred that these *Vongese* fight to the death? That they be allowed to kill another one or more *Mando'ade* or your people just because you thought they should die to the last man? So what that they murdered thousands and razed our planet? The moment they surrendered, they stopped being our enemy and became a potential ally."
"Lady Vizsla," both Doran and Sannah politely inclined their heads at the *Kyr'tsad* leader.
"*Jetii* Sannah, *Jetii* Sarkin-Tainer," Verde acknowledged regally.
"It that all that's left of the *Kyr'tsad*?" Sannah said in a small voice, glancing at Verde's six followers.
"We can rebuild," Verde shrugged in answer, her face stoic. "It's not like this is the first time the *Kyr'tsad* have been reduced to so few in number. But it's thanks to you, Melodie *Jetii,* that my men who died were able to die as Mandalorians fighting for their homeworld. At least now their names will be recited among those of the fallen during the funeral songs, their lives immortalized."
"I didn't do much, Lady Vizsla," Sannah said modestly.
"You allowed *Mand'alor* and myself to preserve our honor and at the same time reconcile our differences, no easy task." Verde's piercing blue eyes briefly flickered to Valin even as she continued to speak to Sannah. "You turned your enemy into your friends, and because of that, we were able to successfully defend *Manda'yaim*'s moons from whatever plots the *Vongese* had in store. If it wasn't for you, Jedi, my people and I would have been fighting alongside the Peace Brigade and *Vongese*. We might have lost, we might have won, but things would have been *very* different if it were not for you."

Sannah blushed and lowered her head. "Thank you. And I hope that the *Kyr'tsad* makes a quick recovery."
"You shouldn't. We *Kyr'tsad* despise *Jetii* after all," Verde said with some amusement.
"What are the *Kyr'tsad* going to do now?" Doran asked.
"Help *Manda'yaim* rebuild. While *Mand'alor* is off playing soldier, we'll help the civilians repair this planet. Who knows, maybe the good will we'll get from this will see our numbers increase by the hundreds. I'm actually here to pick out a small force of laborers from the prisoners. They helped wreck the planet, it's only fair they help fix it."
"Shaeri?" Doran glanced at the Yuuzhan Vong teen. "Would that be okay?"
"Once we've done a brief interview with the prisoners, we'll send the most compatible ones over to you," Shaeri nodded.
"Maybe the *Mando'ade* can learn from the Yuuzhan Vong just as much as the Yuuzhan Vong can learn from all of you," Sannah chimed in softly.
"Yuuzhan Vong in *Beskar'gam*, that'd be the day," Verde laughed. She glanced at Shaeri. "We'll be waiting over by that transport. Send whoever you can, whenever you can. Thanks to all of your help, we actually have a future to look forward to."
([{Chapter End}])
A\N: Next chapter up Wednesday, a single chapter update. It'll be the interlude between stories, as things shift gears once more.

ADA 52 Interlude VII

Fifty-Two
(-o-l-) (-o-l-)
The *Night Eye,* a two-seater Z-95 Headhunter equipped with an advanced array of sensors, swooped in from high orbit over the marshy planet of Dagobah. While she had been with Admiral Kre'fey's taskforce, Shaeri served as its communication's and sensor operator during combat operations. Now, however, she was simply a passenger along for the ride as Tahiri skillfully landed the fighter on one of the more stable areas of the planet-wide swamp.
"So this…this is a sacred place to the Jedi?" Shaeri said, viewing the twisting vines and trees through the cockpit canopy.
"Yeah, doesn't look like one, I know," Tahiri gave a small laugh as she powered down the fighter and removed her helmet. "I've actually been meaning to come back here since I became…well…me."

"You mentioned that Jedi make pilgrimages here to face their worst fears."
"Uh huh," Tahiri popped open the fighter's canopy and the wild sounds of the swamp washed over them; a cacophony of hoots, croaks, hungry growls, and ear-rending howls that would normally send shivers through most individuals. "Anakin, Uldir, and I visited here with Master Ikrit and Peckhum. Anakin was afraid that he'd become a Sith like his grandfather and wanted to face that fear."
"And what is it you fear, Tahiri?"
"A couple things," Tahiri shrugged and climbed out of the cockpit. She made a face as her bare feet came in contact with the mossy, wet ground. "Shoulda worn boots. Oh well."
Shaeri exited the fighter as well and inhaled deeply. The warm air was rich with the smell of plant-life and swamp gas, adding to the wild character of the enigmatic planet. "This place…it seems so alive."
"It's very strong in the Force," Tahiri explained in a hushed whisper. "It's why it's so sacred to the Jedi."
"And have all Jedi made a pilgrimage to this…cave, you mentioned?"
"Only a few," Tahiri said. "Not everyone is strong enough to stare their worst fears in the face and beat them. Thanks for coming, though, Shaeri. It's definitely a lot better to do this with a friend watching your back."
"If I were not here, you would have come with Anakin?"
"Yeah," Tahiri sighed, hugging herself with one arm at the mention of his name. "It's strange. It's barely been a month but I miss him so much already."
"Hopefully they'll return with Zonama Sekot soon," Shaeri tried to cheer up her companion.
"The last talk I had with him said that they were nearly ready for the hyperspace jump," Tahiri nodded. They began to trudge through the marshy lands, their presence causing all sorts of animal life to shriek out in annoyance. "I mean, I know that now's not exactly the best time to go facing my demons. We *are* in the middle of a galactic war and everything. But I figured, a new year, a new me, why not?"
"What do you think you'll see in the cave?"
Tahiri glanced at her Yuuzhan Vong 'sister,' helping her over a fallen and rotting log. "Myself mainly, but as a Yuuzhan Vong."
"You do not seem to fear that part of you."
"Anakin once had a dream," Tahiri explained. "No, more like a vision. He said that he saw me older, but scarred and dressed as a Yuuzhan Vong. I was a dark Jedi, he said, killing the last of another people. If it had been anyone else, I would have ignored it. But Anakin has always

been strong in the Force. I need to see if I can face this vision, see if I'll become the monster he once feared I would become. I may be me now, but I've changed once. Who's to say I won't change again?"
"I cannot see you going 'dark,'" Shaeri commented mildly. "From what you told me of dark Jedi on the trip over, Jedi go dark because they become reliant on something or someone. Whether it's love, or power, or revenge, they devote their entire lives to it and will do anything to further it. I can't see you as the type of person who has to rely on anyone or thing to give meaning to your life. Even if, gods forbid, Anakin does pass into your Force, you are much too strong for his death to twist you in such a way. You love and respect him too much to dirty his name by becoming 'dark' for his sake."
"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Shaeri," Tahiri grinned. "And like I said, myself as a Yuuzhan Vong is what I *think* I'll face. Who knows, maybe the cave will surprise me."
The wildlife around them continued their natural chorus as the two teens performed a delicate balancing act on a narrow strip of stable land surrounded by swampy water on both sides. Shaeri's eyes darted to the side as she took note of a scaly-finned creature coasting beneath the water beside them.
"Tahiri," Saheri whispered, gripping her amphistaff.
"Don't worry, it shouldn't attack us," Tahiri replied, though her own eyes continued to follow the underwater creature's movement.
"Shouldn't?"
"Master Skywalker beat him up once already," Tahiri said in a low voice. She activated her lightsaber, and the sound of the blue blade flaring to life caused the creature to completely submerge itself. "It knows better than to eat us. Think of it like a temple guardian."
"If you say so," Shaeri muttered, edging closer to Tahiri.
Another low growl sounded from around them, and this time the sound of something large could be heard pushing its way through the swamp. Tahiri cocked her head to the side. "Oh, a Swamp Slug."
"Swamp Slug?"
"Uh huh, we should probably move a little bit faster."
Needing no further encouragement, Shaeri matched Tahiri's new pace. In the distant background, a massive roar went up, and the sounds of trees breaking and swamp water splashing gave way to another howl. In the shadows of the swamp around them, Shaeri could make out massive white, spider-like creatures scurrying away from whatever titanic battle was taking place.
"And this place is sacred to the Jedi?" Shaeri repeated, her heart pounding even as the sounds of conflict grew distant.

"A cycle of life and death, an ecosystem in perfect balance," Tahiri's head bobbed. "During a time when Jedi had to hide, one of the greatest masters, Master Yoda, exiled himself here. The planet's strong connection to the Force shielded him from detection by dark Jedi. This place was also where Master Skywalker learned how to use the Force. The end of one era and the start of a new."
"This Master Yoda must have been crazy," Shaeri said, watching with wide eyes as one of the spider-creatures she had seen earlier devour another swamp denizen with its sucker-like mouth. She hurried after Tahiri to catch up. "This place seems more like a punishment than a place to hide. I could easily see Shimrra or one of the others use this as a prison planet. Shape the creatures here so that they become even more fearsome."
Tahiri shuddered at that. "I'd dread the day the Yuuzhan Vong ruin this planet. And in a way, you're right. The way Tionne tells it, Master Yoda came here to both exile himself, but also to punish himself, for failing to stop the fall of the Jedi. He felt guilty that so many Jedi had died under his watch and used the dark energies of this planet to ensure that he never forget their deaths."
Shaeri grimaced. "To constantly relive the deaths of friends, that would indeed be a punishment."
A short while later, they came to a more stable section of the swamp, and Tahiri held up a hand. "We're here."
The Freed One looked around and saw a rather innocuous cave, with small vines and moss covering the rocks at the entrance. "This is it?"
"Expecting something more grand?"
Shaeri nodded. "It's just a cave."
"Full of dark side energy. Wait here, I shouldn't take long."
Shaeri found a rock to sit on, and she nodded. She was more surprised, however, when Tahiri handed over her lightsaber and amphistaff.
"Tahiri?"
"I don't need weapons to face my demons," Tahiri smiled, though Shaeri could tell the smile was forced.
"You are strong indeed, my goddess," Shaeri murmured, catching Tahiri's outstretched hand for a second in an attempt to reassure her.
Tahiri exhaled shakily and nodded. "Thanks for coming with me."
"It was no trouble," Shaeri smiled, setting Tahiri's lightsaber on her lap. "It was the least I could do considering what you have done for the Yuuzhan Vong."
"Well…I guess, this is it," Tahiri glanced back to the cave haltingly. "I should be fine. I'll be out in no time."
Tahiri exhaled once more then, very slowly, entered the cave.

(-o-II-) (-o-II-)
"I call this meeting of the High Council into order," Cal Omas said calmly. "As Jedi Knight Jacen Solo, Jedi Knight Saba Sebatyne, Jedi Knight Corran Horn, and Jedi Masters Tresina Lobi and Kyp Durron are still out in the field, and due to the sudden galaxy-wide disruption of the HoloNet, we won't be voting on anything too controversial this time around."
"The Jedi Order appreciates that," Kenth Hamner, one of only two Jedi capable of attending physically.
The other Jedi, Cilghal, mimicked Kenth's thankfulness.
"Now, we all know that this war is drawing to a close," Cal Omas continued. "We are advancing on all fronts. More and more Yuuzhan Vong are defecting by the day. Though we still take losses, and occasionally have to give up a sector or two, we can replace our forces faster than Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong can replace their own losses. Last meeting we all heard how Master Skywalker and the three Solos successfully made contact with Zonama Sekot. With Sekot's willingness to aid our cause, I say it's time to start taking steps to isolate Coruscant. Supreme Commander Sien Sovv, the floor is yours."
"Thank you Chief of State," the Sullustan fleet commander rose and the room dimmed as the holoprojector hummed to life. "In coordinating with our allies, we have been able to retake approximately forty percent of the territory we have lost to the Yuuzhan Vong. Now, we can continue this slow, system-by-system approach, at the cost of many lives, or we can strike the head of the serpent that is the Yuuzhan Vong. There are several key systems that need to be taken before we can strike at Coruscant, however. And these systems need to not only be taken, but held as well. This means protected supply-lines, guaranteed reinforcements should they be called for, and the like."
The hologram of the galaxy narrowed in on the Core, Colonies, and Inner Rim regions. Several systems blinked for the High Council and a gathering of military commanders to see.
Sien Sovv motioned to the other commanders who were attending the meeting as guests. "As one alliance, we have all agreed that the taking and holding of these systems is a priority and key to ending the war. This will be a massive undertaking involving simultaneous pushes from all directions. Though we are at risk of spreading ourselves too thin, we know that we have more ships and people to spare than Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong. General Antilles and Dukat Gray of the noble house of Hapes, have agreed to be the ones making a push for the retaking of the shipyards at Fondor. They'll have the support of Captain Solo and the Smuggler Alliance forces."

"Hopefully it will turn out better for Hapes than the first time around," The male Hapan said lightly. "The Queen Mother has the utmost confidence in our ability to succeed."
"A second taskforce, led by Grand Admiral Pellaeon of the Empire, General Garm Bel Iblis, and Major Hess'irolia'nuruodo of the Chiss, are focusing on retaking the shipyards at Bilbringi."
The Imperial leader, Chiss Major, and Garm Bel Iblis just nodded silently to acknowledge their role.
"A third force, headed by Admiral Kre'fey and the forces of the Tion Hegemony, will be systematically clearing out Yuuzhan Vong down the Perlemian Trade Route. They'll stop at Corulag until the rest of the fleets are in position to strike."
"We will definitely be hurting the Vong with this strike," Kre'fey said with a confident harrumph.
Sien Sovv continued his briefing. "A fourth group—the Hutts, the Bothans, led by our own Colonel Nek Bwua'tu, General Panib of the Bakuran Defense Force, and the Freed Yuuzhan Vong—will be pushing through the Corellian Run. Their goal is to retake Duro, force Corellia to join in the fighting, and make a push all the way until Wukkar. A team of Jedi will be with them to specifically help in the 'negotiations' with the Corellians."
"Is that why you had us send the Horn family with Colonel Bwua'tu?" Kenth Hamner asked.
"Indeed," Sien Sovv blinked. "Jedi Horn and his children will be among the forces participating in that leg of the push."
"And the reason for the teams of Jedi with the other fleets?" Cilghal asked.
"A necessity," Sien Sovv's head bobbed. "In light of the galaxy-wide communication's issues with the HoloNet, we'll be relying on the Jedi to alert each other through the Force should anything go wrong. Of course, we'll also be employing hyperwave transmissions and couriers—much like the Empire did—but the time lag means that these methods will only be effective on a short-range basis."
"In addition to the assault on the Inner Rim, Colonies, and Core systems," Director of Fleet Intelligence Ayddar Nylykerka said. "The Mandalorians, Artoriasi Rebels, Adumari, Red Moons, and Wraith Squadron will launch hit-and-run on Yuuzhan Vong garrisons and holdings throughout the Outer Rim to keep those forces occupied. We need to not only ensure that Master Skywalker and Jedi Knights Solo have the time and safety to return with Zonama Sekot in tow, but that the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong leadership realizes that this war is lost."

"And I thought you said you weren't voting on anything galaxy-moving," Jartre Rinmek laughed. "If there's one thing those scarheads succeeded in doing, it was definitely uniting this cesspool of a galaxy. How long that will last though, I can't wait to see."
Cal Omas cleared his throat. "Yes, well, as Observer Rinmek so kindly pointed out, we are indeed united in this effort. Are there any objections to this plan?"
"Just one," Cilghal said calmly. "We are having all our available ships, all of our allies' vessels, dedicated to this engagement. What's to stop the Yuuzhan Vong from coming up with a similar strategy and launch an all-out attack here?"
"In two words? Very little," Ayddar replied succinctly. "Though we will have a small holding force in position, we're gambling that we can take them out before they can take us out. Any hyperspace routes not being used by our forces will be laced with our newest interdictor mines developed by the Hapes Consortium. Likewise, the P'w'eck have weaponized their entrenchment technology, attuned for Yuuzhan Vong life-signs, and have created gravity-well like mines that will hold the essence of the Yuuzhan Vong ship in place while more conventional mines do their work. I am not saying that there is no risk to this attack. The Yuuzhan Vong under Shimrra, despite their losses, still have an estimated one-hundred capital ships left at their disposal. They pose a grave threat, but as the Freed Yuuzhan Vong have proven, the Yuuzhan Vong aren't wholly unreasonable people. Once Coruscant becomes ours again, and they see Zonama Sekot as a viable alternative homeworld, they will have no reason to fight."
"Then I pray that your gamble pays off," Cilghal said neutrally. "You have the support of the Jedi Order. May the Force be with us all."
(-o-III-) (-o-III-)
The Prophet, known as Yu'shaa to his followers, held out his arms in an all-encompassing embrace as he stood upon the twisted wreck of a speeder. Before him was a gathering of hundreds of Yuuzhan Vong Shamed and lower class warriors, Shapers, Intendant caste, and priests. All gathered to hear his heretical message.
"Hear me!" His voice rang with conviction, and the Prayer of Redemption being murmured by the gathered Shamed Ones faded away. "Hear me oh faithful! Hear the voice of the prophecy!"
"Speak Great One! What message from the gods do you have for us today?" Someone in the crowd beseeched.
Yu'shaa touched a hand to his ooglith-masquer covered face and closed his eyes. He began to hum rhythmically, chanting in a foreign tongue. Finally his misshapen eyes opened. "They bid me to tell you of

the news of the stars and the skies. A scouting force from Domain Val went out, only one ship returned. Within the belly of the vessel that was Domain Val was another ship, one not of our making; but not of this galaxy either. They carried with them the seed of our origin, our true home!"
"And how do you know this?" Naazar, now a regular at the gatherings, spoke out. "The Supreme Overlord would not have let this information out freely."
"You are wise beyond your years, High Priest," Yu'shaa inclined his head. "This information, however, was given to me by the gods, and they know all. They saw me worthy enough of this information so I could share it all with you. If you do not believe me, then I invite the newest member of our Freed brethren, Commander E'khm Val, to speak. He was in charge of this expedition and managed to escape certain death at the hands of the Supreme Overlord thanks to the Freed Ones within the Supreme Overlord's glass palace."
A scarred warrior stepped in front of the Prophet's overturned speeder. "Yu'shaa speaks the truth! I have seen with my own eyes a planet with a mind of its own. With just a single thought it could conjure up lightning storms, could pull ships out of the sky. It was as every bit a living creature such as you or I, only on a much broader scale. My crew and I barely escaped with our lives, but not before we managed to capture one of the vessels the planet employed. If I may be so bold, I would dare say that the very planet I found was indeed Yuuzhan'tar!"
A noisy cacophony rose from the crowd in a mix of excitement and incredulous cries.
"There! You see, High Priest!" Yu'shaa said. "The gods do not lie. E'khm indeed found the planet from which all life came from. The planet of our origins. But the false ruler that Shimrra is, denies us this crucial information."
"Even with the information, there is little we can do," Naazar said. "We have no ships capable of outrunning Shimrra's fleet. Even if E'khm lives, the Supreme Overlord will never allow him to command another again. I have little doubt that what is left of Domain Val is already undergoing harsh retributions for E'khm's discovery and his subsequent escape from execution."
"My friend, that is where the *Jeedai* come in," Yu'shaa said patronizingly. "The gods would not have granted us such a boon, would not place us within arm's reach of our goals, only to deny us. If we entreat the *Jeedai* to take us to the true Yuuzhan'tar, they will surely agree. The Freed Ones have shed sweat and blood at their command, have suffered greatly because of the fear Shimrra has for anything

heretical. If anyone will help us, it will be those who called themselves avatars of our gods."
"But which one should we approach?" another spoke. "If the reports are right, the Solos and Skywalkers are on the true Yuuzhan'tar as we speak. No other *Jeedai* has been too accepting or trusting of us."
"Ah, but there is one more," Yu'shaa said, holding up a hand. "The gods allowed the Shaping of the One-Who-Was-Shaped for a reason. The gods made her the bridge between our two worlds just as they made me the bridge between this world and their own. The Freed Ones are many. We have but to send word to her and she will no doubt come to us and, as the avatar of Yun-Shuno, deliver us as she should."
(-o-IV-) (-o-IV-)
Tahiri stepped tentatively further into the cave. She could feel the dark side of the Force imbued in every rock, in every mat of moss. This was a corrupted place, a place that fed off one's worst fears, worst nightmares. As she took another step, she could hear herself screaming, pleading, thrashing about as the Yuuzhan Vong experimented on her. Tahiri closed her eyes and tried to block it out. It was hard, as every rush of wind that whistled through the cave carried that strangled voice.
Tahiri could hear her own breath, heavy and ragged, as she ventured further into the cave. "Come on, come on. What do you have for me?"
A masked figure, dressed in Yuuzhan Vong armor, stepped out from the opposite side of the cave. Tahiri shivered violently. The armor and mask made it impossible for Tahiri to see who the figure was, but she could tell that the figure was definitely human. The figure brought up a hand encased in yorik coral, a lightsaber was visible for a fraction of a second before a bright red blade flashed into existence.
The vonduun armored individual did not advance, and neither did Tahiri. The screams which had reached a fervor pitch when the figure had stepped out, had now died away completely, leaving an unearthly silence in its wake.
Tahiri studied the figure, her heart pounding in her chest. She resisted the urge to call upon her Force bond with Anakin.
This was something she had to face by herself.
She stepped forward towards the figure. The figure angled the lightsaber blade towards her. Though the Yuuzhan Vong armored figure seemed so real, Tahiri knew that he or she was simply a Force manifestation of her own worst fears. At first she wished that she had brought her own lightsaber, regardless of the instructions passed down to her from Anakin and Luke '*you only face what you take with you.*'
But then, something Alema had once said came to her.

You can continue to fight your demons for forever, or accept that they are a part of who you are and move on. Fighting it can only get you so far, you won't ever beat them but they can definitely beat you. Those who think they have won, have only suppressed the darker side of them to be used against them at a later time. But acceptance, acceptance will allow you to face that fear, acknowledge it, and then take control. Those demons will still exist, but <u>you</u> determine how they'll affect you and not the other way around. Believe me, I've done my fair share of fighting my demons when Numa died. It was you and Anakin who helped me accept what happened and move on.

Without another second of hesitation, hands held out to her sides, Tahiri stepped forward and impaled herself on the outstretched saber with a small smile.

Instantly, a storm of Force energy howled through the cave as the dark miasma blasted through Tahiri like a violent gust of wind through a stack of cut grass; her golden hair and loose clothing buffeted in a wild fury of uncontrollable darkness. She sucked in a breath. It felt as if she had just received a direct injection of ice into her veins. When she exhaled, a cloud of vapor left her mouth and nostrils. The distant screams returned, this time echoed with the shouts of countless others, groaning clones crying for help, a harsh mechanical breathing, the combine terrors of all the cave's visitors in a single second. The malevolent energies clouded her mind, made her vision blurry.

She blinked once.

She held up a hand and nearly recoiled. It was pale, deathly so, with blue veins visible beneath the skin. Anger, hatred, bubbled within her, threatening to devour her whole. She was powerful, more so than most of the Jedi her age. Why should she put up with the bigotry and close-mindedness of the individuals who stared at her scarred forehead? Why should she play nice if the others treated her as if she had Rojo Fever? They could die just like all the others. She need not waste her energy to save people who only made the galaxy a miserable place to live. Images flashed through her mind, of her living a life where she had to bow down to no one, where everyone respected and feared her. She was at the helm of a powerful ship, armies of followers ready to cleanse the galaxy in her name. Never again would someone question her loyalties. *She* had the power. *She* was in control. And the anger only made her stronger.

Yet as angry as she was, as much as she despised the looks she received from all the others, she realized that even if she did let them all die, she would still be as alone as ever. She stood at the helm of the

ship, but she was by herself. Her power made it so that no one could be at her side.
The emptiness immediately snapped her mind back to reality, and everything seemed to fall away.
She was not alone. She had friends, a family, people who supported her when she needed them the most. What were they going to do, abandon her?
All at once, despair and jealousy followed next in a deluge of overwhelming emotion—the cave playing with her feelings for Anakin, for Alema, trying to turn her against the two of them. Images of the two in an intimate embrace appeared before her. Of the two walking away from her hand-in-hand. She saw them adopt a family of their own, go on to become heroes as the poor orphaned girl from Tatooine was left forgotten by the wayside. Tahiri suddenly had a red-bladed lightsaber in her hand. It took her all of her effort to keep herself from slashing at the two of them, and then from turning the blade onto herself. She could see Leia and Han's disapproving, almost pitying looks, could see Jaina staring at her as if she was a complete stranger. Tahiri took several step back, her legs shaking. With Anakin gone, they had no reason to care about her. With Anakin gone, she had no family. A pair of invisible hands, made purely of dark smoke, seemed to grip either side of her head. Eyes, yellow and twisted with malice, stared down at her in false sympathy. Tahiri began to whimper, her emotional turmoil making her only see the inviting nature of the gaze. She just wanted that hurt to stop, wanted some place in the galaxy where she was wanted. The mysterious figure in the shadows offered a way, a way to channel that despair into strength, jealousy into motivation. She could have a family again if she only gave in. She began to lean into the embrace of the invisible hands, surrendering herself so that she'd at least belong somewhere. Her eyes fluttered shut, letting the darkness take her.
But before her mind turned off for good, Shaeri's words filtered through her mind.
I can't see you as the type of person who has to rely on anyone or thing to give meaning to your life. Even if, gods forbid, Anakin does pass into your Force, you are much too strong for his death to twist you in such a way. You love and respect him too much to dirty his name by becoming 'dark' for his sake.
Shaeri was right. Tahiri's eyes flung open, and she wrenched herself out of the grip with a snarl.
Suddenly, her lightsaber was gone, replaced by an amphistaff curled around a blue-toned arm. She was a Yuuzhan Vong, scarred and

tattooed. Their language echoing in her mind in a never-ending litany of words. Shaping instruments were attached to the ends of her fingers, her forehead burned from the fresh lattice work of scars carved into it. Her life was devoted to her gods, to her domain and people. This galaxy was hers for the taking, its inhabitants mere annoyances to the powers the gods had granted her. An image of several *Jeedai* appeared before her; on bended knee with hands bound at their backs. These were heretical figures, her enemies. They were the last of the Jedi. She would purify the galaxy of their taint and the gods would reward her.

She raised her amphistaff, but then paused. Very slowly she lowered her arm. There was no honor in slaying unarmed, defenseless prisoners. She was a Yuuzhan Vong, not a murderer. One was *not* equivalent to the other, and no god was going to change that.

The figures changed. Now they were Shamed Ones prostrated before her, hers to rule, hers to command. Legions of soldiers knelt down behind them. She had an army at her disposal, untold number of fleets and zealots ready to die for her. Even the Supreme Overlord didn't stand a chance at the might she wielded. For Domain Kwaad, no, for herself, she could command this army of hers and shape the galaxy into one of her own desire. She could have it all to herself, share it with Anakin. No one would bother them, question them. Jedi, Yuuzhan Vong, Empire, Galactic Alliance, they would all bow down to them. Anakin would be the emperor, and she his queen. They could carve out a future befitting for people of their status. No one would doubt her any longer. No one would look down on her, belittle her, mock her joint heritage. The galaxy hers to do with as she pleased.

As she gazed on the countless star systems, a single planet stood out—Tatooine. She didn't need star systems, she didn't need the galaxy to like or respect her. All she needed was a home, a family, and she had one with the Jedi, with Anakin.

And everything snapped back into focus. Her hands were normal, she was unarmed. The cave was empty. There was no vonduun-armored human with a lightsaber, no Anakin, Alema, or kneeling figures. The wind was just that, the wind; with no screams or whispered cries carried in its wake. The cave didn't seem as dark as before, not as foreboding. Her heart was gradually returning to a steady rhythm, her breathing evening out. She was lying on her back, staring up at the root-gnarled ceiling of the cave, her clothing damp with both sweat and swamp water.

Groaning, Tahiri sat up, rubbing at the scars on her head. It felt as if she had just lived several lifetimes, as if everything she had seen had

been so real. The warning about the future always being in motion came to her, and she shivered almost fearfully. All four of those futures she had lived through could very well happen. She wasn't sure how, but she knew that she'd do her damnedest to avoid them. She would choose a future where she and Anakin lived happily ever after, watching their children and children's children grow up and live their own lives to the fullest.

With that decided, on unsteady legs, she pushed herself up and staggered to the entrance of the cave. She had never been hung over before, but from what she knew by watching some of the older Jedi and pilots, she was feeling pretty similar to that post-inebriated state. As she neared the entrance, she saw that Shaeri was there.

The Yuuzhan Vong's eyes bulged at Tahiri's ragged figure and Shaeri promptly scrambled to her feet.

"I'm fine, Shaeri," Tahiri managed, swaying and being caught by the younger Yuuzhan Vong as she left the cave.

"You were gone for two days, I feared something had happened," Shaeri said in a small voice, supporting Tahiri's weight.

"I wanted to be in and out of that place as fast as I could," Tahiri laughed feebly. "I guess the Force had other plans for me."

"I went back to our fighter to retrieve some supplies," Shaeri motioned to the small camp she had set up. "I wasn't sure if I should venture into that cave or not."

"No, you did fine," Tahiri said, sighing as Shaeri laid her down on the bedroll. "Oh Force, my head."

Shaeri managed a wry grin as Tahiri went through a series of swear words in different languages. The blond teen had closed her eyes and was attempting to use the Force to ease the throbbing. "Maybe the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong are alike in more ways than a thought."

"Yes, definitely feeling pain from that religious experience," Tahiri groaned.

"Were you able to face your fears?" Shaeri began warming up a pot of stew.

"More or less. Not doing this again anytime soon, that's for sure." Shaeri handed Tahiri a waterskin. "I can tell why very few Jedi choose this rite."

Tahiri accepted the organic flask gratefully, gulping down the fresh water before staring up at the thick layer of clouds above them. The scenes from the cave came back at full force, and Tahiri was reminded of a darkness within her that she hadn't been aware had existed. Or if she had been aware, she had never paid it too much attention before. It was doubly strong—the negative emotions, fears and desires, of both

Riina and the old Tahiri wrapped up together in a pit of murky darkness.
At first it scared her. The darkness seemed insurmountable now that it had been let free from that little corner of her soul. She remembered all the hate, the greed, the envy, and desire, every second of it. She felt stained, and not just because her shirt and pants were damp with swamp water. It was as if an oily sensation was pervading her thoughts and being. She closed her eyes and exhaled. Now she understood more so than ever the fine line both Anakin and Alema were walking. That darkness was so tempting, the feelings of rage and greed so satisfying. She had to admit that using that power did have some appeal. All she had to do was reach into the small, insignificant little minds of the bigots and zealots and 'correct' their way of thinking. It wasn't just the Yuuzhan Vong part of her that wanted this, but the Jedi, human part as well. The Yuuzhan Vong invasion was an injustice, sure, but so was the continued punishment of those who realized their mistake and were trying to make up for it. She had the power to change that, she was more aware of that than ever.
But the moment that thought crossed her mind, she gasped and opened her eyes. Her heart, which had only recently resumed its natural pace, was pounding once more.
Rocks, twigs, the supplies from the camp, which had all been levitated during Tahiri's internal conflict, plopped back to the ground. Shaeri, who had kept one hand on the pot of stew to keep it from turning over, looked at Tahiri in concern.
"I guess the test is still ongoing," Tahiri whispered. "How in the Great Talking Bantha's name does Anakin and Alema do it?"
"Tahiri?"
"The darkness within them," Tahiri murmured. "Instead of fighting it, denying it, they willingly tread in it. They use it selfishly, but also selflessly. Their darker emotions become the fuel they use to power light-side actions. It's like living a constant paradox. Their rage and fear motivates them to protect others. A lust for power is used to unite a fragmented group so that they would *all* be strong enough to overcome the next obstacle. They hate because they love, gain power so there can be peace. And all it will take is one slip, one moment of weakness, and their inner demons will consume them. No wonder the both of them told me I was better off sticking to the stuff Master Skywalker teaches."
"So…you understand them better now?" Shaeri said hesitantly.
"'Understand'? I guess you could say that."
"But?"

"But…" Tahiri exhaled. "I think I want to try things their way."
"Their way? Walking in the dark?"
Tahiri nodded. "Anakin's already getting massacred in the media because his views of the Force differ from the mainstream approach, I'm not going to let him go through that alone. Besides, everyone's already wary of me with my forehead scars and ability to speak Yuuzhan Vong. It won't be much of a change for me."
"Are you certain you want to ignore their warnings, the warnings of your Master Skywalker, and walk this path?"
Tahiri exhaled. "Yeah. Remember, in that conversation on the *Falcon* before we took off for here? Anakin told me he was staying on Zonama Sekot after the war as some sort of stupid self-imposed exile. Since I'll be staying too, maybe this different view of the Force will help bring us even closer together."
"Is that even possible? If you were any closer, you'd be one person," Shaeri remarked lightly.
Tahiri rolled her eyes. "Ha ha, little sister."
"I try," Shaeri grinned. She held up her ladle. "Here, try some stew."
Tahiri glanced at the lumps of meat. "I didn't know we had freeze-dried meat in our storage bin."
"We didn't," Shaeri said conversationally. "You *were* in that cave for two days. Had to pass the time somehow. I let those giant white spider things make the kill, then I just slew that spider thing. They had all sorts of meats inside their stomach, a natural mineral-laced stew. Of course I made some modifications to it to make it more palatable. But those freeze-dried foods and nutrient bars didn't look too appetizing."
Tahiri looked at the ladle again, paling slightly. She was once again reminded of the difference between human and Yuuzhan Vong cuisine. "You *have* tried this, yes?"
"You'll be the first," Shaeri said proudly.
"Great," Tahiri groaned.
"I would never purposefully poison you."
"That's not making me feel any better," Tahiri muttered, blowing on the ladle before taking a small sip. It was surprisingly good.
"Good?"
"Yeah," Tahiri blinked.
"On the Worldships, we have a creature who performs a function similar to those spiders," Shaeri grinned. "I wasn't sure if it would work out. I'm glad it did."
"Speaking of Worldships," Tahiri said, accepting a small bowl. "How come the first time I learn of your domain is through Sannah, Miss Shaeri Jamaane?"

"You've…never asked?" Shaeri said sheepishly.
"Shaeri."
"At first I was ashamed of my domain name, and then I was fearful of your reaction if you discovered the Supreme Overlord and I shared the same domain. Afterwards, well, it just didn't seem to matter anymore. Just as your new family is with the Solos, my own is with the Jedi."
Tahiri's gaze softened and she set down the bowl of stew to hug the smaller Yuuzhan Vong teen. "You got that right, Shaeri."
"Finding your place in this galaxy feels kind of good, doesn't it?" Shaeri smiled tucking her head against Tahiri.
Tahiri's mind took her to Anakin and Jaina and all the others who made it known where she belonged. She had a family, a future, a home.
"Yeah, it does. It really does."
(-o-V-) (-o-V-)
Jacen Solo stared up at Mobus, the massive gas giant rotating in the sky of Zonama Sekot. There was a lot on his mind. Normally he would be ecstatic about finding a planet like Zonama Sekot. It was his dream world, full of all sorts of flora and fauna that no one had even seen before. He could easily see how the Yuuzhan Vong had come from such a diverse and mystical world. The main thing that confused him was how the Yuuzhan Vong evolved so that they were outside the Force when all of Zonama's life was within it.
But that wasn't the only thing preoccupying him. Being around so much life reminded him of those few weeks he had spent with Tenel Ka exploring the nature preserves of the Hapes Consortium. In that time, he had come to realize the feelings he had for his childhood best friend were a lot stronger than he thought they were. Just being around her had been relaxing and—dare he say it—fun even. They were a strange pair.
Unlike the relationship Anakin had with Tahiri, Jacen and Tenel Ka didn't need each other strength-wise. Tenel Ka had an indomitable spirit, an iron will that allowed her to stare down even the most hardened of Hapan politicians. Whereas Jacen was a member of the High Council, secure in his own beliefs in the Force and his own role in the galaxy. They may have both been only twenty years old, yet countless people looked to them for advice, for their leadership.
And unlike Jaina and Jag, their relationship was more mental than physical. Both Jacen and Tenel Ka had sharp minds, capable of reading situations and adapting to them. Their activities kept them star systems apart, *an entire galaxy apart now*, Jacen mentally amended; Hapes and Zonama were about as opposite of the Core as Bastion was to Tatooine. Yet, the distance did nothing in the slightest to affect their

closeness. The times they did have were few and far apart, yet the experiences they had shared growing up had forged an unbreakable bond.

Of course, explaining to any future kids that you were the one to cut off mommy's arm might be a little hard, Jacen smiled faintly. *Kids.* After the excursion into Hutt Space, but before Tenel Ka and he had parted ways, she had definitely left him with something to think about. The adventures in the Imperial Remnant had momentarily caused him to shelve those thoughts. But now, in the peacefulness of Zonama's tampasi, his mind wandered back to their parting.

"*Might I have one last moment of your time, my friend?"*

"*Of course, Your Highness."*

"*Please, Jacen, when we are alone, I would prefer you call me by my name."*

"*Tenel Ka," Jacen briefly embraced her and then stepped back, only just, and gazed into her warm grey eyes. "What's wrong?"*

"Nothing is wrong...not exactly."

"Tenel Ka?"

"I...I recently received a message from my mother. She reminded me that as Queen Mother of Hapes I have one additional duty. One I must eventually fulfill."

"'Eventually'?"

Tenel Ka appeared to steel herself as she held his gaze. "As Queen Mother, I must eventually produce an heir so that the royal lineage is continued."

"She said that?" Jacen found it hard to believe that the Dathomiri woman would lecture her daughter about being the Queen Mother. He had the impression that Teneniel would rather Tenel Ka be free to follow her own heart, without any outside pressure.

"Not in so many words."

"Oh?"

Tenel Ka was unable to meet Jacen's eyes as she murmured, "She mentioned something about expecting grandchildren and hoping that they are strong enough to eventually take over for me just, as I have taken over for her. And she was...right, to point out that I still have an —obligation, to fulfill."

"Oh."

"I...I am not saying that I am in any rush to do so," Tenel Ka said quickly, some color coming into her cheeks. "It is just...whenever I have ever contemplated our...my future children, they have always had only one individual as their father."

"Oh?"

"You really are going to make me say it, aren't you?"
"It's not every day I get to see the Queen Mother of sixty-three star systems flustered. I have to enjoy this moment as much as I can."
"I might have to start imagining another father for my children," Tenel Ka remarked blandly. "Maybe some strapping noble who's physically appealing and nicely biddable."
"You'd be bored of him in a heartbeat."
"You said that rather quickly."
"I've met most of those biddable nobles," Jacen replied. "There's no way you're having babies with any of them."
"Do you have another, more suitable candidate in mind?" Tenel Ka raised a copper eyebrow, fighting back a grin. There was no mistaking the terror and jealousy, however projected in teasing, coming from Jacen at the thought of her being with another man.
He rarely voiced his feelings for her, let alone let her feel them through the Force. Just as she likewise kept her feelings for him closely guarded in her heart. It was something that just went without saying. It was as natural as breathing, the assumption that they would always be partners in some shape or form. Of course, it was nice every once and a while to know how he felt towards her.
"How would it work? Not the...erm, details, I know that," Jacen said, his expression turning solemn. "But any child we have will be made instant targets by the nobles. I'll be an instant target for the nobles and all of Hapes, even if I am just a consort."
"The child could be had in secret," Tenel Ka pointed out. "The nobles would never have to know who the father is."
"That would have to be the worst kept secret ever," Jacen, gently cupped her face with one hand and let his thumb graze her lips. "We do have some of the strongest Jedi of our generation as friends. And do you really think I'll do something as selfish and make you raise any child of ours alone?"
This time Tenel Ka couldn't keep the corners of her lips from tugging into a genuine smile as she placed her hand atop his. "And I would not be so selfish as to drag you into Hapan politics. I can't ask you to suffer that on my behalf."
"It's a good thing you don't need to then," Jacen whispered against her lips, giving her a soft kiss. "Five, ten, fifteen years from now, I'll be at your side. You'll have your heir and..."
"Heirs," Tenel Ka corrected, causing Jacen's eyebrows to rise.
"Heirs?"

"If you think that in fifteen years at my side, all we'll have is one child together, we might have a small problem, my best friend," Tenel Ka said with a hidden grin.
"Isn't it Hapan tradition for siblings to…you know…try to off the other?" Tenel Ka was ready with a solution. "We'll raise them as Solos. Like you, Jaina, and Anakin. An unbeatable team ready to pull Hapes into the future and beyond."
"You've put a lot of thought into our future children."
"It is not so unpleasant a thought to think about," Tenel Ka whispered, reluctantly stepping back and out of his arms. "I am not quite ready yet. But, when this war is over, when we have had a chance to rebuild..."
"Soon, then," Jacen murmured, their fingertips finally ghosting past each other.
Recognizing the line, Tenel Ka inclined her head. "Soon."
Thoughts of the family he would have with Tenel Ka were overridden by the knowledge of the family he would soon 'lose.' Anakin and Tahiri would be staying on Zonama Sekot indefinitely. Despite everything the Solos had been through, the space battles, pitch fights, and innumerous near-death situations, Jacen couldn't believe that he would lose his little brother to politics.
Heck, he couldn't believe that he was on one of the highest councils in the Galactic Alliance government and he was being forced to go along with his brother's plan for the 'good of the galaxy.' It didn't sit well with him, and he would be the first person to admit that he was fairly angry, frustrated, that it would come to that.
What annoyed Jacen the most was the self-sacrificing attitude Anakin seemed to have. As if Anakin had just given up against all the opposition. Sure helping the Yuuzhan Vong was a worthy cause, but then again, so was helping to keep the rest of the galaxy together.
Jacen sighed, shifting on the mat of moss he was laying on. He was only just beginning to like having his little brother around again; had only begun to once again feel that comforting wholeness that had once been their family. But even with the war ending, that wholeness wouldn't be there in the end. The carefree days he had had with his family wouldn't return. Sure Anakin might still be alive, but it had been agreed that Zonama Sekot would retreat to the Unknown Regions once the Yuuzhan Vong had settled—no need to go looking for trouble. The war was coming to an end, he was about to lose his brother to politics, and he *still* couldn't come up with a better alternative.
His mind strayed to darker thoughts. He was on the High Council. It obviously wasn't enough. What if he gained enough power so that he

could force Waxarn's knights to fall in line? He could ensure the safety of his siblings, of his parents, and they would be able to live happily for the rest of their lives. Was it the dark side to want only what was best for those you love?
Love.
Once again Tenel Ka entered his thoughts. She was powerful in her own right but faced a constant threat of assassination. She didn't need him to protect her, but was it so bad to gain enough power to make her life easier?
"Lost in thought, young Solo?"
Just blinked, suddenly finding his last ideas very alien and disturbing. He couldn't believe that he had even been considering it. He tilted his head back and saw the culprit for the sudden dark turn in his thoughts. Vergere was standing over him, her head tilting as they made eye-contact.
"Don't do that," Jacen said, annoyed.
"Do what?" Vergere took a seat next to Jacen's reclined form. "Help you hide away your true thoughts and desires?"
"Everyone's allowed to have a few dark fantasies now and then, so long as they *stay* fantasies. Just because I had an occasional thought or two doesn't mean that I want to act on them."
"True. Does this mean you will allow your younger brother to continue his foolish and cowardly plan? To run away when the galaxy needs him?"
"We'll be able to handle without him."
"Is that pride, confidence, or jealousy talking?"
"Jealousy?"
"Even in his fall, your younger brother still manages to elevate you. With him gone, you ascend to prominence. It falls on your shoulders to undo the damage he's done to the order, to ensure that his name causes no more dissention in the ranks of the Order. The more you distance yourself from him, the faster your rise. The more you sympathize with him, the quicker the Order will fall. And then, just like before, an Anakin will be responsible for the collapse of another Jedi Order. Your success in the Jedi Order depends on his failures, else you will be eclipsed by the greatness of your brother. Do you disagree?"
"Interesting view," Jacen said neutrally.
"Then it is pride then? You already see yourself superior to him and are grateful that he will no longer stand in your way. That you will no longer have to question yourself and your views of the Force. With Anakin staying on Zonama and you on the 'High Council,' there will be no one of sufficient strength left to oppose you. It hurt when they at

first picked him over you, and now you will show them the error of their ways. That you were the right choice all along and they were too foolish to see that. You are the remaining Solo the council will listen to, the Jedi Orders yours to shape without any interference from your brother."
"Is that so?"
"Confidence? Do you truly think yourself ready to step into the vacuum your brother will leave behind? At but a word he was capable of mobilizing fleets from all across the galaxy. At the wave of his hand, he was able to convince you, your sister, and a dozen other Jedi to launch a suicide mission deep into the heart of Yuuzhan Vong controlled space. He could see the Yuuzhan Vong in both Vongsense and the Force. *He* was the one the High Council initially wanted, not you. When you talk with the younger Jedi, who do they want to imitate? Not Jacen Solo, the philosopher and older brother. But Anakin Solo, hero and leader, the daring young Knight who does what must be done regardless of the odds. Of course you are strong, and your brother obviously trusts you enough to step up in his absence. But the question is, are you able to? Will the masses even listen to you, a twenty year-old who has hidden in the shadow of his little brother for all this time?"
"Vergere, why are you here?" Jacen said resignedly.
"Which is it, pride, confidence, or jealousy?" Vergere countered.
"None of the three."
"Truly?"
"Yes, Vergere, truly," Jacen glanced at her. "Contrary to your beliefs, the reason why the Jedi Order will be able to continue to function without Anakin, or even if I'm not strong enough to take his place, is because it is an *order* of Jedi. Like my uncle proved, the Jedi Order is far more than one or two people. If I am not strong enough, others will help me, or I will step down and let someone better take my place."
"When you say that others will help you, you are referring to your sister and the red-haired Jedi in your thoughts."
"My sister, Tenel Ka, Tesar, Lowie, Zekk, *everyone*," Jacen said mildly. "This Order is different because we'll all support each other and help strength the other."
"Just like *everyone* was there to support and strengthen your younger brother?" Vergere said sagely. "By forcing Anakin into exile because of his divergent beliefs, this Order is beginning to look more and more like the orders of the past."
"What would you have me do, then, Vergere? Declare myself Emperor and force my ideals on others just because they conflict with my idea of happiness?"

"That is one possibility," Vergere shrugged.
"And the others?"
Vergere clasped her clawed hands together. "In my times, when Jedi were found to be…lacking…in certain areas of the Force, they would be sent to different teachers in an attempt to find something they excelled at. Unlike the Jedi of today, the range of Force techniques and views of the Force available to learn was wholly diverse and exciting during the days of the Republic."
"You're saying I need to get a better understanding of the Force?"
"No."
"Vergere, I'm tired of your games, of your riddles, can you please just tell me what it is you are trying to say."
"Have you ever thought about what you would do when this war is over?" Vergere said, ignoring Jacen's plea.
"Vaguely. I didn't want to make any plans until I was sure I'd still be alive at that end."
"You are frustrated with Waxarn Kel and his followers, with all the divergent views of the Force threatening to fracture this new order, with the fact that your brother seems intent on making a martyr of himself regardless of what happens. Have you ever considered that it is not their minds you need to change, but your own? That as powerful as you are, you are gazing at the Force through only one set of eyes and not many?"
"Tahiri said something similar about my knowledge of the Yuuzhan Vong. That I was using a set and limited experience with them to interpret everything I knew about them."
"She has her benefits," Vergere agreed. "Just as you view the Yuuzhan Vong through this limited scope, so too do you view the Force. You have been born and raised on the doctrines spouted by the young Master Skywalker and those who learned from him. Even my own view has been distorted by what I have learned from my masters. If you truly wish to understand the Force, to see it not just as your brother does, but transcend his own understanding, then you need more frames of reference. When this war is over, I would advise you to seek out all of the other Force sensitive groups in this galaxy. Learn from them, their abilities, their views, their way of living. From their knowledge you will gain both understanding and the strength to do what needs to be done."
"And you couldn't tell me this in the first place, why?" Jacen arched an eyebrow.
"Where would the fun be if I told you everything the minute you asked? How would you learn?" Vergere chortled. "But I was serious in my

intent. In order to grow, to surpass your brother or to protect him, or both, you need to become more attuned with the Force than ever. Make whatever reasons you wish, but you are in need of, how shall we say it, a 'prolonged spiritual journey to explore the Force.'"
"Is there any specific goal to this journey?"
"When you reach a certain point in your travels, you'll know that you have achieved it," Vergere said with a cryptic smile. "I leave you to your thoughts now, Jacen Solo. You can, of course, decide not to listen to my recommendations. I am merely offering you an alternative, a choice where before there was none. You will still lose your brother, but at the same time, you will gain the abilities to prevent something like this from ever happening again. "
(-o-VI-) (-o-VI-)
Jaina Solo felt oddly uncomfortable on Zonama. It wasn't that she disliked the abundance of nature and the constant thrum of the living Force all around her. In fact, that in itself was more than amazing. It's just that, as a pilot and someone who tended to dive head-first into action, the lackadaisical, peaceful atmosphere of the planet felt…off. Even on Mon Cal there had been dissent, conflict, strife. The Yuuzhan Vong had even launched a suicide attack to keep things interesting. But on Zonama, there was none of that. The Ferroans worked in perfect harmony. Even those who had voted not to help the Jedi were now pitching in the preparations for a jump to hyperspace wholeheartedly. Any conflict or strife was not manufactured or out of hatred or greed, but a part of the natural cycle of life. It was as if Zonama embodied everything the Yuuzhan Vong were *supposed* to be; living creatures in perfect sync with one and other.
She was never one to think about the finer intricacies of the Force; her brothers did enough of that for the three of them. As her thoughts turned to the powerful Force energies around her though, she was finally able to put a finger on what made this peace so unnerving to her. To her, the perfect synchronicity was completely and eerily unnatural. She had always been taught that violent struggle was a way of life, that darkness would always be the galaxy's natural state and that light would always been in conflict with it. The sort of equilibrium around her was supposed to be something everyone sought, but no one could achieve; and her own experiences seemed to confirm it. For as long as she had been alive, the galaxy was either full of light or full of darkness, never in between. She and her friends would either beat back those who wished harm on the galaxy, or were beaten by them. War across the stars was practically an everyday occurrence—there was the Clone Wars, the Galactic Civil War, the fights against the

various warlords, the Ssi-ruuvi Imperium, the Second Imperium, and now the Yuuzhan Vong War. Darkness forever coveting what the light had, the light forever guarding against a return of the darkness.
Yet, on Zonama, everything was in balance; the light *and* the dark. It was a natural darkness, one borne of innocent instinct, of the need for survival. A chaos that had its own limits, eventually giving way to the light once it had expended itself. The light was every bit as natural—upheld not by Jedi or peace-officers, but by an entire eco-system working in harmony with those in it. The Ferroans had no concept of greed, of the same corruption that had spoiled the rest of the galaxy. They were selfless, even going so far as to agree to share their planet with invaders from another galaxy. Everything Jaina had seen seemed to indicate that it was her brothers' theories about the Force—that the Force was just one whole and not two sides— were more accurate, than the theories her uncle and the other Masters espoused. Zonama was not light or dark, but a perfect balance of both.
Of course, that then brought her to Zonama's consciousness, Sekot. Jaina still couldn't quite wrap her mind around the concept of a sentient planet even after staying on the planet for two weeks. An entire world strong in the Force and able to do things Jaina could only dream of…
"I am flattered."
…Such as appearing right behind her as a child version of her grandfather.
"Sekot," Jaina hummed lightly.
"Out of all the Jedi who have come, you are the one who is least at ease being here," Sekot chimed in Anakin Skywalker's voice.
"I hope you aren't offended," Jaina said with a weak smile to the powerful being who could probably vaporize her with just a thought.
"Not offended, just curious. What about me unnerves you so?"
"It's just so—peaceful, here," Jaina said softly. "My uncle named me the Sword of the Jedi; someone my friends will follow into battle and my enemies will fear. But here…I have no purpose. There are no wars to be fought, no battles to be won. My brothers know much more about the Force then I will ever care to learn. They're the nature nuts, and I'm just, me. A sword has no purpose on this planet, it will only dirty it and corrupt it."
"And what of the Far Outsiders?" Sekot asked, taking on the form of the Ferroan girl Trescia. "What will they do to this planet?"
"Hopefully learn what true peace and happiness is like," Jaina answered with a sigh. "For all their aggressiveness, I can *see* the

Yuuzhan Vong on this planet. It just feels right, like a homecoming for a long last family member."
"Strange, you're a sword, but you want peace."
"Don't we all?" Jaina looked to the Ferroan-girl replica.
"But when you have peace, what will you, a sword, become then?"
"A wall decoration," Jaina shrugged. "But as much as I want to hang up my blasters and have a nice quiet life, I know that the end of the war won't change much. There'll still be pirates, other criminals, those trying to take advantage of the lull in fighting to profit from those unable to protect themselves. I was told that peace is something I would give to many, but would never have myself. For some reason, I don't really mind it at all. I mean, as long as I have my brothers, my mom and dad, as long as they're safe and happy, I don't mind if I have to continue to fight; to make the galaxy a better place for them. This planet, this tranquility and balance, it's an anomaly compared to the rest of this crazy galaxy."
"Is that a good thing?" The small Ferroan girl asked, lightly blowing on a nearby flower to scatter its seeds.
"I guess," Jaina chuckled. "I guess making the galaxy more like you, like Zonama, basically sums up my job; a controlled chaos, a naturally occurring cycle of life and death. None of this vast, galactic war that throws everything off balance. That ravages entire planets, wipes out entire species at a time."
"You're funny," Tescia-Sekot giggled.
"Funny?"
"I can barely keep track of everything that takes place on this single planet. I need the Ferroans to help keep the balance you so clearly admire. Yet you, a being far tinier than I, try to regulate an entire galaxy."
Jaina grinned. "I can see why that's funny. And you're right, I do sound a bit pompous. But if I don't at least try to bring order to the galaxy, to help protect those in need, I'd only be contributing to that chaos. Just like you have the Ferroans, I have my friends, my family, and all those who want a galaxy at peace, helping me out."
"Then I wish you the best of luck on your endeavor then," Sekot said gently, taking the form of the Magister again. "It sounds like an impossible task, taming an entire galaxy. But, from what I've seen of you and your family, I can tell that if anyone will make noticeable progress towards that goal, it will be all of you."
(-o-VII-) (-o-VII-)
"Exactly," Anakin Solo motioned. "The next central Yuuzhan Vong village can be nestled right by those mountains over there. We can

spread out several farming communities and villages all around the surrounding countryside. Since Sekot can cause the crops on this planet to grow fast, we'll be needing Sekot's help for the first few harvesting seasons. The Yuuzhan Vong can rely on their food stores as they set up. Before those stores are depleted, we should have the first batch of crops ready to supply everyone."

"You have indicated that there will be at least five central villages so far. Will this not create divisions between those in the farming villages and those in the central village?" The true Ferroan Magister, Jabitha, asked with a puzzled frown.

"The Yuuzhan Vong are already divided," Anakin explained to the group of Ferroans helping him plan out future settlements for their soon-to-be new neighbors. In the background, Mara, Luke, Jacen, and Jaina looked on. "Caste, domain, social status. All of that's going to be thrown off kilter once the war ends. They're already going to have to adjust to a sedentary, peaceful lifestyle on a planet they've never stepped foot on. The last thing we want to do is strip them of *everything* they are used to. We also don't want to hobble them economically in any way by forcing them all into tiny, barely self-sufficient enclaves that will cause them to close their doors to the others. What we're trying to do is give the Yuuzhan Vong a base from which their new society and government can build from, something they can be proud to be a part of.

The Yuuzhan Vong are a proud people, their warriors especially so. If, instead of reducing all of their warriors to farmers, we give them a different purpose, bring them to our side so to speak, we can avoid a lot of future problems. We give them central cities to protect, to keep the order. Give them country-sides to patrol. We keep their warrior spirit alive and redirect their skills for protection instead of aggression. Instead of an army, we make them into law-enforcement, a branch of the Supreme Council that can help keep the peace. Even if the Yuuzhan Vong completely relocate to Zonama, we're not going to want them to remain cut off from the rest of the galaxy. Supply convoys, diplomatic missions, the warriors can all play a hand in maintaining the Yuuzhan Vong's link to their new home galaxy.

The same can be said of the Intendant caste. They're used to running massive bureaucracies. They've had to keep the social infrastructure of their entire people intact through a journey across galaxies and through a galactic war. Though some of them may relish a chance to finally kick back and relax, we have to give at least a small challenge to those who want to stay on. Fortunately for them, coordinating shipments of grain and food to the larger cities from the nearby

farming communities will be a whole lot easier than trying to coordinate supply convoys across star systems. Like the warriors, we don't want to alienate those of the Intendant caste. The Freed Yuuzhan Vong government will help keep the Intendant caste from having a lock on all positions of power, but at the same time we need the experience the Intendant caste members have to offer if we want to keep this new society stable."
"Then what about their shapers and priests?" Jaina spoke out. "I can't see these two castes stepping down from their roles too easily."
"They won't have to," Anakin grinned at his sister. "The shapers, like Domain Rin, will be continuing their work, but at the same time striving to develop *new* technology for the Yuuzhan Vong. Without the Supreme Overlord's restrictions, I can't wait to see what they come up with. Same for the priests. For a society moving to a new planet, one that is so like their original home-world, entering a different and probably very scary unknown future, the Yuuzhan Vong will need religion more than ever. Only, instead of the priests answering to the primary political entities, the priests can help these new communities bond. They'll provide the glue, so to speak, that keeps the Yuuzhan Vong tied together. We don't have to completely abolish the Yuuzhan Vong's social structures just because we've defeated them. We simply give them the necessary tools and situations to transcend beyond their current functions. In the future, I envision the castes of Shaper, Priest, Intendant, and warrior, to become more like occupations as the time goes on. If a priest grew interested in Shaping, those staying on Zonama with the Yuuzhan Vong should help encourage him to learn. Just as if a Shaper or Intendant wanted to be a warrior. Without the discipline and threat of death provided by the Supreme Overlord, and with a secure place to live, the Yuuzhan Vong social structure can become more flexible in how it operates."
"And the Freed Ones?" Mara said. "Tahiri would probably beat you over the head with your own arms if you forget about them."
"As scary as she can get, my girlfriend isn't a Wookie, Aunt Mara," Anakin said dryly. "And I haven't forgotten about the Freed Ones. In fact, the ultimate test for the new society is how the Freed Ones interact with the other castes and vice versa. The Freed Ones, like all the other castes, will be encouraged to assume any role in the new society that they desire. The goal of the Ferroans and others who will settle on Zonama, is to remind the Freed Ones not to abuse their new positions of power. We'll also have to set some type of reconciliation panel to help the Freed Ones deal with the abuses they had gone through at the hands of the other castes. Of course, we can talk about

this more when Taan and the others arrive, but much of what I'm saying has also been the conclusion she and the Supreme Council have reached."
"You show an interesting amount of concern for a people waging war on your galaxy and killing so many," one of the Ferroans spoke out, confusion in his voice. "Why do you care so much about what happens to them after they are defeated by your people?"
"I'm a Jedi," Anakin answered sincerely. "If they honestly want to have a life different than the one they are currently leading, I'm all for helping them achieve it."
"Well said," Sekot complimented, coming together in the form of the young Anakin Skywalker. "And I for one am interested in learning as much about them as I can. The more I think about this arrangement, the happier I am with it."
"Thanks again, for agreeing to help us out, Sekot," Anakin bowed his head politely.
"No thanks needed. I believe that this will be as great a benefit to you as it will be to me."
(-o-Chapter End-)
A\N: Next update Sat/Sun...and we begin my pretty original story-plots for my take on the Final Prophecy.